WORKPLACE
A JOURNAL FOR ACADEMIC LABOR
ISSN 1715-0094

#36
2025

Backer, D. I. (2025). Weak link policies: The finance that can determine material conditions of teachers' work. *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor, 36*, 32-47. https://doi.org 10.14288/workplace.v36i1.187152

WEAK LINK POLICIES: THE FINANCE THAT CAN DETERMINE MATERIAL CONDITIONS OF TEACHERS' WORK

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INTRODUCTION

Underneath the culture war headlines so familiar to educators in the United States in the 2020s is a more complex class war over the material conditions of schooling. As the post-pandemic economy settled in, a wave of budget crises erupted in school districts, leading to closures, mass firings, and program cuts ("Cut, Fire, Close," 2024). Teachers have had to work under these conditions, with the constant threat of loss of livelihood, yet the threat can feel opaque: the public finance policies determining the struggle are often hard to understand, even for the district officials tasked with making the decisions which could potentially shutter a school, throw whole departments out of work, or put much needed programs on the chopping block. The same is perhaps more true for teachers. Faced with one of the most significant challenges to public education in generations, it thus became more important for teachers to know about policies at the heart of budget crises in their districts to be able to push back, defend, and expand public education in the United States.

In this article, I give three examples (from districts in Michigan, North Carolina, and Massachusetts) of what I call *weak link policies*, esoteric load-bearing policies in the struggle over school resources. These policies, while hard to understand, massively influenced teachers' working conditions in these districts. While demands to change these policies could mean the difference between large-scale firings or retaining staff, closing a school or keeping it open, the policies were not widely understood in such a way as to organize successfully around them.

Using a critical school finance (CSF) and integrated social reproduction framework (ISRT), I narrate stories of financial practices that were structurally impactful in local budget crises to demystify them, but also ideologize them, rendering them more actionable targets for teacher organizers to change. I do this using an intentionally informal, blog-oriented, and journalistic style to render the typically hard-to-understand material more scrutable to general audiences of people impacted by these policies. Using school district news sources, budget meetings, and publicly available financial documents such as audited financial statements and bond statements and public

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legal records, I use this informal style to tell the story of three school district budget crises and point to the weak link policies at the heart of each struggle, drawing some general conclusions at the end.

In New Hanover County, North Carolina, for example, a controversy erupted that mixed xenophobic anti-migrant politics, working class educational programming, space utilization and municipal debt to create a crucible of budget crisis. While the fight was nominally about the closure of a career-readiness program called Mosley Academy, the county's policy of maintaining a debt capacity—preventing the district from taking out loans for its facilities—in the face of the district's space utilization problems was the porcelain of this crucible. In Ann Arbor, Michigan, we find the Michigan State Pension and Retirement System (MSPRS) and its one-time deposit policy,[1] a mistake about which cost the district $14 million amidst a tense change of leadership. The accounting error the district made led to more than 60 layoffs and a crisis in the district community. Finally, several districts in Massachusetts, Hingham among them, faced the prospect of something called an override vote. These votes make or break a district's ability to tax themselves more to provide education in their districts, due to tax levy limitations set by Proposition 2.5 in the 1980s, except in Hingham, the municipality created a semi-formal policy called a memorandum of understanding that created defensive taxation caps to avoid such a vote (Meyer 2023).

In each case, I point to the weak link policy and invite those who may think of themselves as 'not good at numbers' or policy wonks to engage with these policies, and, as I suggest in the conclusion, to fight wonky, since wonky policies are so powerful in determining the circumstances of teachers' work.

FRAMEWORK: CSF, ISRT, AND THE WEAK LINK

Though there is a long tradition of studying and producing knowledge about school finance by, with, and for the diverse working class, critical education researchers have only recently begun publishing on questions of school finance policy (Backer & Cyna, 2024; Owings & Kaplan, 2023; Backer & Cohen, 2022; Backer, 2020; Rodriguez & Rolle, 2007). Using concepts of racial capitalism, critical resource theory, and theft to understand schools and money, critical school finance researchers have approached questions of schools and money using mixed methods and interdisciplinary approaches in history, geography, philosophy, and others (Backer & Royal, 2024; Backer & Rodriguez, 2024; Backer, 2023). These efforts have gone under the recent heading of critical school finance, bringing the normative and empirical tradition of critical theory to bear on questions of schools and money. Yet, this framework has not been applied to teachers' working conditions. And while the extensive literature on teacher labor organizing (Dyke & Muckian-Bates, 2023; Stark, 2023; Basica, 2023; Bascia & Stevenson, 2017) addresses fiscal and budgetary issues, such as Buras's (2014) examination of charters in New Orleans and Lipman's (2013) examination of tax increment financing in Chicago, this critical school finance approach could deepen its engagement with the nitty-gritty details of finance policy from the perspective of teachers' movements and organizing.

Backer and Cairns (2021) put forward a framework for teacher labor by combining insights from the semi-divergent streams of social reproduction theory in education (SRE) and the more recently

[1] This policy sends school districts payments from state monies to cover a certain amount of unfunded pension liability, as I explain later.

revived social reproduction feminism (SRF). They propose that researchers and organizers combine the former's emphasis on the reproduction of relations of exploitation with the latter's emphasis on the reproduction of life in an integrated social reproduction framework. Such an integrated framework can examine, for example, the contradictions capitalism presents for teachers as they do their work, emphasizing both the gendered carework involved in teaching day to day and the ways this work both supports and is undermined by racial capitalism, which also comes to bear on teachers' organizing (Brown & Stern, 2018). Theorists Sue Ferguson (1999) and Nancy Fraser (2017) have pointed out that capitalism needs social reproduction just as it simultaneously undermines that reproduction, creating a contradiction for capitalism at the site of the reproductive work that maintains life itself, a type of work which has been historically feminized.

An integrated SRT, or ISRT, forges both these streams of thinking about education and capitalism together to understand the contradictions of social reproduction in capitalism, emphasizing the dynamic between care work and the maintenance of social relations that undermine that work, in education and elsewhere. I argue that combining both CSF and ISRT yields a novel framework for education research generally, as it creates an intersectional conceptual apparatus concerned with the project of an antiracist socialist feminism in education finance policy, articulating these insights from CSF and SRFE to understand the specific financing policies in racial capitalism that both provide resources for teachers' work and simultaneously undermine it. For the purposes of this paper, I put forward the concept of the weak link policy to understand particularly impactful policies in this regard.

The French communist philosopher Louis Althusser (1971) in his essay "Contradiction and Overdetermination" addressing the complexity involved in understanding the dialectic of class struggle, mentioned what he called the "theme of the 'weakest link'":

> A chain is as strong as its weakest link. In general, anyone who wants to control a given situation will look out for a weak point, in case it should render the whole system vulnerable. On the other hand, anyone who wants to attack it, even if the odds are apparently against him, need only discover this one weakness to make all its power precarious. (p. 19)

Thus, in terms of a struggle between groups, some of which are dominant and others insurgent, the concept of the "weak link" presents an analogy for determining opportunities for the insurgent group to gain control of a situation. The image is potent: if a chain is holding you down, find the weak link to break it. How does one find such a link? Althusser (1971) says that a weak link constitutes "the accumulation and exacerbation of all the historical contradictions then possible" (p. 19) in a situation. What makes a weak link weak, so to speak, is the fact that certain contradictions of the moment are gathered there and become exacerbated in ways that dominant groups cannot fully control. Applying this concept to education policy, a *weak link policy* is therefore a policy in a system of policies where historical contradictions accumulate in such a way that, if the policy were challenged, would render that system vulnerable, and, further, anyone who wants to control that system of policies should look out for such policies, even if the odds are against them.

In the following examples of budget crises in North Carolina, Michigan, and Massachusetts, I narrate the situation of the crisis and pick out what I think may be the weak link policy on which

educators could focus with the goal of gaining more control in what can otherwise seem like an inevitable situation: the district budget crisis.

SPACE AND DEBT CAPACITY IN NEW HANOVER, NORTH CAROLINA

New Hanover County School District is in the vicinity of Wilmington, North Carolina is a diverse, mid-sized district with 24,841 students at the time of writing. According to New America's educational segregation map, this district enrolled 41.19% students of color and 58.8% white students. It had a poverty rate of 11.31% and a median home value of $277,900 (Reardon et al., 2024). The district's recent budget crisis circled around a special school called Career Readiness Academy at Mosley ("Career Readiness," n.d.). Mosley was a special program that served about 63 students and had its own staff, with its own building, which also housed a pre-K and a special education program. The dispute was about closing CRA-Mosley though, and that facility—the building itself—became very important later.

Conversations about closing Mosley had been going on since 2021. The closure would have required moving those 63 students, who are identified as being diverse working class (largely Latino, 58% poverty). The proposal for Mosley's closure inspired protests from those families. This protest was made amidst two larger forces that made this situation more intense: right-wing anti-immigrant politics and the federal pandemic relief fiscal cliff. These streams were also flowing in a riverbed of the racial capitalist school funding regime, specifically the debt regime, an under-appreciated part of the story. In a budget meeting held on Wednesday morning, January 17th, 2024 (New Hanover County Schools, 2024), the school district and county leadership met to hear a presentation of results from a utilization study forecast. They hired a consultant to figure out how full the school buildings were in relation to current enrollment and future forecasts.

The consultant reported that there was "extensive overcrowding," tracking space utilization in middle and high schools. The consultant found that the district's facilities were 104% utilized, leaving no excess space in the county and emphasized that the district needs to add space for the kids that are here, and that there was "no way to redistrict your way out of this" (New Hanover County Schools, 2024) The district needed to figure its space issues, and quickly. What does this have to do with closing Mosley? At a key moment late in the meeting, after discussing the extensive space needs, a county board member, who sounds like the budget and/or finance director, said that the county still has about $111 million in school debt that they had to pay down.

This came up during a discussion about debt capacity, which is essential for financing the creation of more space for students to solve the utilization problem. School districts need to sell bonds, going into punitive and unstable debt, to get money for their infrastructure (Backer & Royal, 2024; Schirmer, 2021; Sbragia, 1983). The finance official said the district sold a bond for $160 million in 2014, and ten years later, there was still $111 million of that to pay down. He then said he would caution the board to reserve debt capacity for things beyond schools, since the county has to pay for police and other municipal services.

A discussion about the structure of the debt followed, noting the fact that the 2014 bond was issued in $20 million increments over the ten years, refinanced several times, with a kind of frustrated re-emphasis on the fact that this $111 million, held by the county, is all school debt, not general county debt from its other expenditures on police, fire, and water service (New Hanover County).

There was a hefty pause to appreciate the immensity of that amount. What the school board and county commissioners were feeling was that, while there's a need for space capacity, there was no debt capacity to create it. Debt service was already 13% of the percent of the county budget, behind education (23%) and police (24%). A state law limits the county's ability to take any more debt, the threshold of which was set at 15% (New Hanover County Board of Education, 2023).

At that moment Dane Scalise, a county commissioner, asked whether they were getting ready to end the meeting, because he had something he wanted to bring up. He said, "I want to follow up, because it pertains to a lot of what we're talking about today, which is what's going to happen with Mosley" (New Hanover County Schools, 2024). Scalise had connected the conversation about space utilization, debt capacity, and the special school. There was another tense pause.

Sitting across from Scalise was Charles Foust, the district's Black superintendent. Among a few other comments on Mosley, Foust had said that "[o]ur thought would be to have a newcomer school there" (New Hanover County Schools, 2024). For context, the idea of reopening Mosley as a "newcomer facility," was to make it a school that would serve new immigrants to help them integrate and get settled into the community. There was a need for this kind of program, given that, according to the board's Vice Chair Pat Bradford there was a "rapidly growing NHCS multilingual student population challenges - 1,505 new students over 4 years who are not English speaking, more than 35% this last year, is a serious challenge that must absolutely be addressed" (Keith, 2023). After Foust brought up the newcomer facility, there was a heated retort from Scalise, who said that he was concerned that having a newcomer school would attract more migrants and refugees "into our community." The tension was palpable.

Later, a board member mentioned that they needed to present a budget to the county commission that cut $11 million, and Mosley was one item where they thought they could save: apparently, it took $1.3 million to run the school for 63 kids. Foust elaborated his rationale for cutting Mosley in this situation. "It's gonna be a hard cut this year," he said, and "I'm looking for a return on investment" (New Hanover County Schools, 2024). Foust argues that given its poor performance on career readiness, the cost of running the program, and the district's need for that facility, that it should be closed. "Is it producing what it's supposed to do? It's not been doing that for years" (New Hanover County Schools, 2024).

A month later, in late February, there was a budget work session, and it came out that there was a $20 million shortfall going along with this situation, which local reporting attributed to Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds running out and the district's reliance on those funds for hiring.[2] About $11 million was put into staff. Also adding to the district's financial woes was that ESSER funding was expiring in September, about three months into the next fiscal year (Keith, 2024). A total of roughly $40 million that was part of 2024's budget was running dry; a little over a quarter of that, $10.8 million, was tied up in recurring funding for staff — meaning the district needed to find a new funding source, or make cuts. Ultimately, the shortfall required the schools to ask for money from the county that they didn't get. In the end, Foust lost the argument. Mosley remained open, there was no newcomer school (Keith, 2024b), and the

[2] ESSER was legislation passed during the Biden administration that established billions of dollars of funds for schools coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. The funding came in three waves, colloquially known as ESSER I (the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act), ESSER II, and ESSER III (the American Rescue Plan) in 2021.

superintendent Foust was fired in early July 2024 for reasons that the board wouldn't reveal (Flanagan, 2024).

In the swarm of tensions creating this situation, a key structural feature of it was that the school board and county commissioners had to reckon with the fact that there was still $111 million of school debt to pay off from a bond they'd sold ten years before. Their limited debt capacity prevented them from solving the space capacity problem, which then came to bear on the problem with Mosley which, when combined with the ESSER funds ceasing, created a ton of fiscal pressure. The district needed space. They couldn't create more space without going into more debt, which they couldn't afford, because there's still a ton of debt left to pay off, and even if they could've afforded it, the county prevented them from going into any more debt through its debt capacity policy. Meanwhile, federal relief was ending and the community, for differential reasons, refused to close a small and relatively expensive school to serve newcomers which a constituency appears to be against ideologically.

The weak link in this chain of force surrounding the district was the relationship between debt capacity and space capacity. My contention is that if the district were not under the ongoing burden of debt service in the first place, and had access to pay-as-you-go funds for capital programs to properly utilize that space the pressures in this balance would be arranged differently and perhaps less oppressively (Rivera, 2017),. There would be resources for both Mosley and, potentially, a newcomer school; at the very least, there would be financial bandwidth to make the case for that newcomer school in the face of anti-migrant politics. Yet the pressure of the magnitude of indebtedness, combined with the debt capacity limitation, created an either/or situation in which the newcomer school proposal lost out, strengthening a potentially xenophobic tendency in the community (exacerbated no doubt by the presidential election, whose Republican candidate Donald Trump, drummed up anti-immigrant sentiments as a centerpiece of the campaign). A different policy regime for facility financing would make a material difference in these dynamics, altering the balance of forces acting on and through the district.

UNFUNDED ACCRUED LIABILITY IN ANN ARBOR

In Ann Arbor, Michigan there was a district budget shortfall of $25 million in 2024. There were some typical losses that district was facing (enrollment drops, federal fiscal cliff) common at that time: $1.4 million in state funding decreased, for instance, and an additional $3.4 million decrease in "overall district revenues," which came, said reports, from an increase in hiring and a decrease in enrollment over the last nine years. Why was the budget crisis so intense? This particular passage might have caught the eye of the careful observer: "Several factors contributed to the budget shortage, including $14 million in state support from last year's budget that was misallocated to this year's" (Ann Arbor Public Schools, 2024). In March, a "financial consultant" named Marios Demetriou gave a presentation to the district's board members (called trustees). During the meeting, right at the beginning, Demetriou said the following:

> we have we had in the budget an item that happened last year, um, it was for the unfunded accrued liability for retirement and, um, we get that every year but also last year there was also one time that came in and then it was, with the unfunded accrued liability…we get the money and then next payroll we send it back to the state on the revenue side…this one time item that happened last year *was still in*

> *the budget* so we are removing it, it's not happening this year so we're removing it. (Ann Arbor Public Schools, 2024, emphasis added)

There is a lot to unpack here. First, the "unfunded accrued liability" for retirement refers to pensions, specifically "the difference between the *estimated cost of future benefits* and *the assets that have been set aside to pay for those benefits*" (Municipal Employees Retirement System, n.d.). Pensions provide defined benefits to retirees. To pay out those benefits, they need income, which they get in the form of contributions from employers. In the case of teacher pensions, the employer is the school district. There's a big debate over whether teacher pensions are in crisis and this issue has now thrown Ann Arbor Schools into a generalized crisis. According to Michigan's teacher pension website:

> Pension Unfunded Actuarial Accrued Liability (UAAL): This portion of the contribution rate is also determined each year by the retirement system's actuary and is charged as a percentage of payroll. The UAAL is the difference between the retirement system's assets and the pensions accrued (for past service) to current and future retirees. Each year, a payment is made against the UAAL reflecting the amortization payment and interest. (Michigan Department, n.d.)

Michigan had a policy called the Section 147.c.2 MSPRS one-time deposit where the state pays school districts and municipalities a certain amount of money to cover pension liabilities, which the districts then have to pay back every year. The money has to be listed as revenue and expenditure each year for it to work. There was a cycle of giving and paying back. According to a 2023 bond statement: the district "will receive a non-recurring State Aid categorical revenue amount (Section 147c2 MPSERS One-Time Deposit) of X for a payment to the MPSERS funded liability" (Public Schools of the City of Ann Arbor, 2023, p. A-9). Again, the district had to pay this money back at the end of the year. This deposit and repayment arrangement was how Michigan managed the pension's unfunded liabilities, by giving and taketh-ing away (Michigan Department, n.d.).

In any case, what Demetriou was saying was that Ann Arbor's budget officials forgot to put this payment in both the revenue and expenditure sections, incurring a huge loss. They kept money they were supposed to give back to the state's pension fund, MSPERS. Why was any of that necessary, and what could be done about it? There was actually a lively debate happening that year specifically on this question.

The libertarian magazine *Reason* put together some research on MPSERS, how it worked, and some proposals to fix the issue, like decreasing the threshold beyond which the state covers the unfunded liability (Peterson, 2024). Meanwhile, on the other side of the political spectrum, the Michigan Educators Association also had its critique of the pension system, for which it was sending around a petition to change state policy. The critique was the polar opposite from *Reason*: the government wasn't spending enough above that threshold; and, further, the state had saved money for a specific form of retirement benefit to such a degree that the fund was over-funded. The union thought the state could use funds from there to increase the pay threshold (Michigan Education Association, 2024).

It is important to get into this debate since such a chunk of Ann Arbor's budget crisis came down to pension policy. Before 2012, the districts were totally responsible for paying down the extent to which the pension wasn't funding itself according to contribution rate calculations. But then in 2012, the state put in place the cost-sharing policy where the state would cover any unfunded liabilities over 20.96% above a district's payroll. That meant the district didn't have to pay for any unfunded liabilities above that threshold. The union agreed with this policy since it took district off the hook. The one-time deposit policy was generous to districts. Yet it was this policy, undergirded by the under-funded pension, that generated the conditions for AAPS's huge budget hole, since they forgot to pay the state back for its help with the UAAL. Parenthetically, the union thought that there was an extra $670 million in state coffers for public education, since the state is on track to over-fund its UAAL for is healthcare for retirees, which was on track to be paid down.

But the Libertarians claimed that MSPERS had $29 billion in unfunded liability, which had to be paid down and recommended more punitive caps to the threshold for the one-time policy, making school districts pay more each year into the retirement policy (Peterson, 2024). At this writing, it wasn't clear yet how the state decided to change the policy, if at all, but the state of play came to bear on the threshold for the one-time deposit policy, which had tripped up Ann Arbor to the tune of $14 million, exacerbating their budget crisis.

At the meeting where Demetriou admitted the budget mistake, trustees asked questions about it, rightly calling the missing $14 million a "tremendous amount of money," summarizing the problem and asking pointed questions:

> Trustee 1: For this year's budget they put in the $14 million expecting us to get it [on the revenue side], which is a presumption, number one, but why wouldn't it also be in the expenditure side if it's always gone back?
>
> Demetriou: I cannot answer the question why, I wasn't here.
>
> Trustee 1: It's just an enormous amount given the numbers…
>
> Demetriou: I'm trying to correct whatever is…um I'm trying to tell you the truth [about what] is happening but…
>
> Trustee 2: So that 14 million was on one side, but not the other?
>
> Demetriou: Correct.
>
> Trustee 1: I'm right to assume it gave us a distorted view of what our budget and our fund balance. (Ann Arbor Public Schools, 2024).

To repeat, the budget office, in putting together their budget request for that year, had to figure out what was coming in and what was going out. How did this mistake happen? The previous Superintendent, Jeanice Swift, was forced out after a bitter period of tension with the district. This bitterness came to a head when a school bus aide attacked a student with autism (Catallo, 2024). The episode was apparently the last straw for many who blamed Swift's approach to special education. The board was nothing if not embattled, with trustees resigning in the face of bullying, for example, and disagreements about spending over the last five years (Anderson, 2024; Kauffman, 2024). Amidst the leadership crisis and worsening budget situation, the board also

struggled with passing a Gaza ceasefire resolution, the controversy around which made national headlines.

The community was divided around Swift, with the teachers' union actually coming out against her immediate removal, asking for due process. Two trustees on the board, who also happened to make up the finance committee, were strong Swift supporters. This fracas was relevant because it was in the kerfuffle that district officials made the accrued liability mistake in all the turmoil, on top of an already-worsening budget situation that the whole country was facing.

Eventually, interim superintendent Jazz Parks was brought in to lead the district. She brought Demetriou back after the departure of the previous administration. Demetriou discovered the huge shortfall when he looked through the books, leading Parks to alert the district to the financial crisis at hand. As this all went down, approximately 60 teachers were laid off and, at the budget meeting, Demetriou said that 94 staff in total may have to be fired to cover this shortfall, since 80% of the district's expenses are labor costs.

The signal in the noise of the crisis in Ann Arbor—the weak link—was the one-time deposit policy, nested in a series of other pension payment policies, like the threshold policy, that created the need for districts to list state cost-sharing deposits as both revenue and expenditure. In the context of the kerfuffle around former superintendent Swift, the budget office made a big mistake and failed to put the one-time deposit as an expenditure, meaning it had to pay the state back on top of the other losses it experienced. As the debate between the MEA and the Libertarians illustrated, the place to attack the situation, the place to gain control of it, would be the pension policy, in the short-term siding with the union's proposal to spend the retiree healthcare funds rather than increase the threshold.

MOU MONEY MOU PROBLEMS IN HINGHAM

In Hingham, Ma, one of the wealthier school districts in the state, as of March 2024, the size of their budget deficit issue was $2.6 million, the crisis is coming down to a $1.2 million hole (Britton Meyer, 2024). The local paper *The Anchor* took their lead from the School Committee and Board, whose position was to blame the teachers' union. The teachers were asking for too much money, they alleged, thus the crisis. But actually, there was a lot more going on in this story. The teachers had been working without a contract. They were just looking for better parental leave policies and more funding for special education programs in the wake of the pandemic. Peel back the surface layers of the crisis and other policies appear more potent than teachers demanding reasonable working conditions.

The town had a new Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that limited municipal spending on particular services, including education. It capped growth in educational spending by 3.5% year to year. That year was the first year the MOU was taking effect and it threw things into disarray. One can find mention of the MOU in the quaintly long PDF called the Town Warrant that talks about everything having to do with the town (it gives Puritan vibes). Article 6 of the Warrant was the headline element, since it dealt with paying for the town's stuff, including schools (Town of Hingham, 2024). Based on the MOU crafted the previous year by the School Committee, Advisory Committee, and Select Board, they were quoted as saying that

> we cannot exceed our operating budget by more than 3.5%, therefore the base figure remains $68,003,624," Correnti said. "The tricky part is that contract negotiations with the Hingham Education Association are still ongoing, and the current proposals that have been accepted by each side have a higher financial impact than we originally budgeted for. Any additional movement we need to make to settle the contract will have an impact on staffing next year. (Britton Meyer, 2024)

So the debate about the MOU had happened the previous year, amidst the teachers' contract fight. Why was such an MOU even necessary? Why would a wealthy community be nervous about increasing its teachers' salaries? At the height of the 1970s and 1980s tax revolts, Massachusetts passed Proposition 2.5, which created a threshold for tax increases every year in municipal government. Towns couldn't increase taxes more than 2.5% because, well, taxpayers might get big mad. After Prop 2.5 passed, municipalities had to hold votes on whether to "override" the 2.5% growth threshold if they needed more money to run the town (Massachusetts Government, n.d). According to the 2023 Town Warrant, Hingham had been lucky because it hadn't needed to do an override since 2009. But things had gotten worse over the pandemic and it was looking like an override might be necessary. They decided on the MOU strategy, as they say in the Warrant:

> A best practice among Municipalities that have had successful override votes is the creation of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) among Town leaders regarding services and future growth. The MOU is essentially an agreement between taxpayers and Town leaders that promises that, in return for an affirmative vote on the override, Town leaders pledge to limit the future growth of operating budgets and not request another override for a defined period of time. An additional feature of the Town's MOU is that a Tax Mitigation Stabilization Fund would be established, subject to voter approval, to help delay the need for a future override. (Town of Hingham, 2024, p. 31)

So the town comes to a kind of agreement with its citizens: "listen townsfolk, we might have to increase the budget next year," they say, "so let's shake hands and agree that it might include a certain increase over 2.5%, but not over a certain ceiling, let's say 3.5%." That's what happened in November 2023 in Hingham, which meant, come 2024, the town wouldn't tax over the 3.5% threshold. When anyone asked about the spending cap, they could point to the MOU. Oddly, the MOU didn't hold for every municipal entity.

> Municipal departments — including general government, public safety, public works, human services, and culture and recreation — as well as the School Department — were held to the 3.5% growth rate stipulated by a 2023 memorandum of understanding among the Select Board, Advisory Committee, and School Committee. (Town of Hingham, 2024)

And even though culture and recreation are included in this cap, the country club in town, the South Shore Country Club, which was a municipal golf course, wasn't held to this standard because it's "self-supporting" (Britton Meyer, 2024b). So, because the members paid their yearly dues, giving it revenue, the country club can spend all it wants, but the school district had to be held within budgetary limits.

But the unions had pushed back on the non-binding 3.5% cap, as the HEA president told me. Yet the pushback was to no avail, the municipal leadership were convinced they needed to do the MOU to get the override passed. Even though they published several comments/opinions in the local newspaper, *The Anchor* over the last year (Hingham Education Association, 2024), held multiple standouts and rallies (every school does a standout 2-3 times a week), practice picketing, had lawn signs all over town, sent over 5,000 emails to School Committee, AdCom, Select Board, and Town Administrator, attended and spoke at hours upon hours of their meetings, voted no confidence in the superintendent, met with state legislators, and attempted to pull together a budget increase motion at the Town Meeting funded by grossly underestimated revenue and "free cash" from the unassigned fund balance. Notably, these efforts were unsuccessful, and one wonders whether part of this outcome was due to the occult status of the MOU process itself.

The weak link policy in the Hingham example was that MOU. While people in the town might be aware of the Prop 2.5 dynamic, perhaps lesser-known—and guiding the direction of the dynamic—was the MOU. The union understood this and pushed back against the semi-formal document in the town's municipal budgetary policy, but unsuccessfully. In any case, the document gathered together contradictions of the moment but also appears open to influence by teachers directly affected by its terms.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A weak link policy is one where historical contradictions gather that thus might be used to control a situation that breaks the chain of the status quo. The policies above—county-level debt capacity in North Carolina, the MSPRS one-time deposit policy in Michigan, and the memorandum of understanding in Massachusetts—each, in their own way, gathered certain historical contradictions into one policy that, in a somewhat hidden way, structured the budget crises occurring in each district. The limit to take on new debt squeezed New Hanover as newcomers entered the district amidst a space utilization issue. The MSPRS one-time deposit created a counter-intuitive situation of a state grant that had to be listed both as revenue and expenditure every year to deal with unfunded accrued pension liabilities, which, when combined with tense disputes and district leadership turnover, created a multi-million dollar budget hole in the district. The memorandum of understanding in Hingham was a kind of extra-budgetary agreement about limiting local taxation on a wealthy community, specifically for public education, in the face of a teachers' union fighting and winning higher wages.

Unions in Michigan and Massachusetts saw the potency of these policies and tried to fight back, but due to their wonky nature one imagines such struggles are difficult to wage against regional ruling classes who have more resources, understanding, and power to influence the situation. Yet teachers must be aware of these policies, and educational communities more broadly. Critical school finance urges us to promote these policies, surfacing them and reframing them in the class struggle so teachers' movements can fight and win the resources they need for their working conditions. To win, we must fight wonky.

But there are added layers here. Each of these policies are supposed to help provide public education but, simultaneously, limit that provision. Social reproduction feminism tells us to expect that contradiction. School districts in the United States have to take on debt to pay for their capital programs, like building new schools, but a debt capacity policy limits a district's ability to take on

debt and get the revenues it needs to have adequate facilities for their students. Meanwhile, districts have to pay interest and fees on huge loans that last for years. Teacher pensions are a key retirement policy for public servants in the United States, but using one-time deposit policies to both help school districts fund the perpetually unfunded liability in a public pension creates a vulnerability for districts who, like Ann Arbor, need that revenue for operating expenses and, amidst the din of the post-pandemic 2020s, forgot to add the deposit to the expenditure column of their budget. Finally, local property taxes and municipal budgets are meant to provide public education generally. Yet the memorandum of understanding in Hingham was a pre-agreement not to raise those taxes to provide public education, preventing a referendum to vote on such an increase.

From an integrated social reproduction lens, each of these weak link policies point to ways that American racial capitalism, in a feminized profession, both provides public education but simultaneously undermines it. Requiring school districts to rely on private debt arrangements for their facilities puts districts like New Hanover in the position of not being able to provide adequate facilities for their students, since the county limits the amount of debt it can take on, as migrants enter the district. If school districts didn't have to rely on private credit, which they have to pay back with fees and interest using complex municipal bonding policies, such debt capacity policies wouldn't be necessary and New Hanover could create and update facilities as needed, thus taking away a key fiscal premise on which those with anti-migrant politics relied in their fight against the creation of a newcomer school. Pensions are a more solidaristic retirement policy (McCarthy, 2017). They pool the social risk of aging, making sure that working-class people have secure income in the years after they're able to work physically. In an economic system that requires people work for a living, and one that punishes diverse working-class communities more than wealthier and whiter ones, a pension policy is a crucial form of income for retired teachers. In each case, there are gendered and raced outcomes for diverse working-class communities in and around schools. Thus, the thesis of this chapter: finding the weak link policies in a school finance, from the perspective of class struggle, is a crucial tactic for teachers and their allied movements in the fight for public education.

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