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## ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, DISCOURSE FRAMING EDUCATIONAL POLICY IN THE QUASI-PUBLIC SPHERE: THE CASE OF THE ATLANTA BELTLINE TAX ALLOCATION DISTRICT, by ANNE E. MARTIN, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Philosophy, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

---

Janice B. Fournillier, Ph.D.  
Committee Chair

---

Deron Boyles, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Joyce E. King, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Teresa R. Fisher-Ari  
Committee Member

---

Date

---

Jennifer Esposito, Ph.D.  
Chairperson, Department of Educational  
Policy Studies

---

Paul A. Alberto, Ph.D.  
Dean, College of Education &  
Human Development

## AUTHOR'S STATEMENT

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Anne E. Martin  
Educational Policy Studies  
College of Education and Human Development  
Georgia State University

The director of this dissertation is:

Janice B. Fournillier, Ph.D.  
Department of Educational Policy Studies  
College of Education and Human Development  
Georgia State University  
Atlanta, GA 30303

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Anne E. Martin

ADDRESS: 23 Larkin Pl SW 204  
Atlanta, GA 30313

### EDUCATION:

Ph.D.	2021	Georgia State University Educational Policy Studies
Masters Degree	2011	Georgia State University Early Childhood Education
Bachelors Degree	2008	Kansas State University Psychology & French

### PUBLICATIONS:

- Martin, A. E., & Fisher-Ari, T. R. (2021). "If We Don't Have Diversity, There's No Future to See": High-school students' perceptions of race and gender representation in STEM. *Science Education*, 105(6), 1076-1099.
- Martin, A.E., & Fisher-Ari, T. (Fall 2021, in press). Participatory research to improve PDS initiatives: Trying-on problem-based pedagogies with high-school students. *PDS Partners*.
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#### PRESENTATIONS:

Martin, A. E., Fisher-Ari, R., & Patterson, D. (2021, April). *Barriers to the demographic imperative: Illuminating and dismantling hurdles experienced by global-majority teacher candidates*. The annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, Online.

Martin, A. E. (2020, February). *Critical Discourse Studies and Epistemological Considerations*. The annual conference of the Southeastern Philosophers of Education Society, Athens, GA.

Martin, A.E., Fisher-Ari, T.R., Benson, G., & Ogletree, S. (2019, April). *Still hidden? High-school STEM students and perceptions of race and gender representation*. The annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, Toronto, CA.

Martin, A.E., Kavanagh, K., Fisher-Ari, T.R. (2019, April). *Educational reforms, white supremacy, and systemic distancing of urban schooling from families and communities*. The annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, Toronto, CA.

Martin, A., Fisher-Ari, T.R. (2018, April). *Engaging in and with our world: PBL and critical literacy within quasi-mandated environments*. The annual conference of the American Reading Forum. Sanibel, FL.

Martin, A. (2018, February). *Emotional labor & school: Another way teachers contribute to inequitable gender socialization*. The annual conference of the Southeastern Philosophers of Education Society, Chattanooga, TN.

Martin, A., Fisher-Ari, T.R., & Kavanagh, K. (2018, April). *Unheard frequencies: Performing and reimagining the oppressive construct of time in urban schooling*. The annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, New York City, NY.

Martin, A. (2017, February). *Neoliberalism, race, and tax-allocation districts in Atlanta*. The annual conference of the Southeastern Philosophers of Education Society, Knoxville, TN.

Martin, A. (2017, April). *Racial-spatial imaginaries legitimating neoliberal takeovers: Critical discourse analysis of the "revitalization" of East Lake*. The annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, San Antonio, TX.

Martin, A., (2016, April). *Education and the sharing economy: How Teachers Pay Teachers advances the neoliberal capitalist regime*. The annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, Washington, D.C.

# **DISCOURSE FRAMING EDUCATIONAL POLICY IN THE QUASI-PUBLIC SPHERE: THE CASE OF THE ATLANTA BELTLINE TAX ALLOCATION DISTRICT**

by

**ANNE E. MARTIN**

Under the Direction of Dr. Janice B. Fournillier

## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative case study considered discourse used to frame and advance neoliberal policies affecting education. The unit of analysis was the renegotiations for The Atlanta Beltline Tax Allocation District (TAD) during the years 2013-2016. In this arrangement, Atlanta Public Schools agreed to forgo their portion of increases in property taxes for 25 years to fund the Belt-Line redevelopment in exchange for annual payments. The Beltline is a 22-mile loop around Atlanta to increase transportation, green-space, and neighborhood revitalization. A quasi-private corporation (Atlanta BeltLine, Inc.) manages this publicly funded project. When Atlanta Belt-Line, Inc. failed to make the annual payments to Atlanta Public Schools in 2013, negotiations played out publicly, resulting in a new deal between the City of Atlanta, Invest Atlanta, and Atlanta Public Schools in 2016.

Guided by critical discourse studies and critical policy analysis, I examined media articles and interviews with five policymakers to identify discursive frames used during the Beltline renegotiation. To situate discourse with actual policy outcomes, I used the State of Georgia's

Education Database to identify school demographic changes between 2012 and 2020. I considered what discourse revealed about (1) social practices around policy negotiation, (2) convergences, divergences, and tensions with accounts of policymakers involved, and (3) the extent that discursive representations aligned with policy outcomes. Findings included discursive frames representing feuding policymakers, highlighting the economic potential of the BeltLine as paramount, using education as a negotiation tactic, championing the power of partnership, and minimizing democratic participation in favor of behind-the-scenes negotiations. Policymaker discourse amplified the issues of unmet promises, displacement, and affordability within BeltLine neighborhoods, which was supported by evidence of increased gentrification in 3 schools along the BeltLine. However, discourse ultimately represented unwavering support for TADs. In all, findings indicated that increases in property tax revenue diverted from a generation of Atlanta Public Schools students will likely result in pricing low-income, primarily Black families out of several BeltLine neighborhoods. In considering whose odds the BeltLine TAD favored, I offer implications for policymakers, community members, and educational leaders, along with a proposed research agenda for critically examining TADs through an educational lens.

**INDEX WORDS:** Neoliberal educational policy, Tax allocation districts, Critical discourse studies, Critical policy studies, Atlanta BeltLine



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OF THE ATLANTA BELTLINE TAX ALLOCATION DISTRICT

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ANNE E. MARTIN

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Research, Measurement, and Statistics

in

Educational Policy Studies

in

the College of Education and Human Development

Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA  
2021

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to the students, families, and teachers of Atlanta Public Schools, particularly those I've taught and worked alongside since 2008. In my role as a 3rd-grade teacher at Benteen Elementary from 2008 to 2012, I saw the impact of neoliberal policy on a local school community first hand, including threats of school closure, state takeover, and impending gentrification and resident displacement. The advocacy I learned alongside elementary school students and their families attending school board meetings to fight to keep their school open was the impetus for my first paper in educational policy studies. This dissertation represents a continuation of that research commitment. To the children of APS, the heartbeat of our city, continue inspiring us all and making Atlanta great.

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I am appreciative of the entire Department of Educational Policy Studies at GSU. I am grateful for an enriching program that supports someone like me who refuses to "fit" into a category neatly, who wants to take all the classes, and who has no sense of urgency to "finish." I deeply cherish the experience of learning from all of you and have been influenced by every course. To Mr. Stockwell and Ms. Moore, you are the best.

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## Table of Contents

<b>LIST OF TABLES .....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS .....</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>1 THE ISSUE.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Guiding Questions .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Situating the BeltLine TAD Renegotiations.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Significance of the Study.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Why Discourse? .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Researcher as Discursively Constructed .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Overview of the Study.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>The Influence of Neoliberalism .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Neoliberalism and the City .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Atlanta Politics.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Discursive Framings of Neoliberal Policy .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>3 METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Critical Theories: Examinations of Power.....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>A Critical Policy and Critical Discourse Approach .....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Epistemological Considerations .....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Research Design and Methods .....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Approach to Data Analysis.....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Delimitations .....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Ethical Considerations.....</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>4 RESULTS .....</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>At Odds: Dramatic Spectacle While Calling for Compromise .....</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Stacking the Odds: BeltLine = Prosperity .....</b>	<b>76</b>

<b>Beating the Odds: Trust Earned &amp; Lost</b> .....	83
<b>What are the Odds? Promises Unfulfilled</b> .....	92
<b>Whose Odds? Benefactors, Politics, &amp; the Public</b> .....	101
<b>Against the Odds: Hope in the Face of Defeat</b> .....	109
<b>5 DISCUSSION</b> .....	122
<b>Discussion of Findings</b> .....	122
<b>Implications and Policy Recommendations</b> .....	131
<b>Towards an Educational Research Agenda Considering TADs</b> .....	138
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	142
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	146
<b>APPENDIX</b> .....	164
<b>ENDNOTES</b> .....	165

**LIST OF TABLES**

Table 1: Phases of Data Analysis .....	59
Table 2: Content Categories & Offspring Codes .....	60
Table 3: Text Segments for Text Analysis .....	61
Table 4: Elements of Textual Analysis .....	61
Table 5: Results Themes and Subthemes .....	69
Table 6: APS Schools on the BeltLine: Changes in Economic Demographics .....	115
Table 7: APS Schools on the BeltLine: Changes in Racial Demographics .....	117



**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1: Map of Atlanta’s 10 TADs.....	<b>6</b>
Figure 2: Map of the BeltLine Tax Allocation District .....	<b>7</b>
Figure 3: Timeline of BeltLine TAD Agreements with Atlanta Public Schools.....	<b>8</b>
Figure 4: BeltLine Adjacent Schools .....	<b>11</b>
Figure 5: Timeline of Participants and the BeltLine TAD Renegotiation .....	<b>56</b>
Figure 6: Photograph of building on Beltline’s Southside Trail.....	<b>143</b>

**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>ABI:</b>	Atlanta BeltLine, Inc.
<b>ABP:</b>	Atlanta BeltLine Partnership
<b>AHA:</b>	Atlanta Housing Authority
<b>AJC:</b>	Atlanta Journal-Constitutional
<b>APS:</b>	Atlanta Public Schools
<b>CBA:</b>	Community benefits agreement
<b>CDS:</b>	Critical discourse studies
<b>COA:</b>	City of Atlanta
<b>CPS:</b>	Critical policy studies
<b>FRL:</b>	Free and reduced lunch
<b>GADOE:</b>	Georgia Department of Education
<b>NPU:</b>	Neighborhood Planning Unit
<b>PILOT:</b>	Payments in lieu of taxes
<b>TAD:</b>	Tax allocation district
<b>TIF:</b>	Tax increment financing

## 1 THE ISSUE

The Atlanta BeltLine is a popular public redevelopment project that changed the city's urban landscape by generating new businesses and housing. The project also has significant implications for education. The project began in 2005, when the Atlanta Public Schools, the City of Atlanta, and Invest Atlanta enacted a Tax Allocation District (TAD) to fund the Atlanta Beltline's development. The TAD agreement stipulated that Atlanta Public Schools (APS) forgo their portion of increases in property tax revenue in the development area for 25 years in exchange for annual repayments. However, after the 2008 recession, the BeltLine could not pay back the agreed-upon amount. The city missed its first repayment to Atlanta Public Schools in 2013 and the subsequent annual repayments in 2014 and 2015. Tension between the City of Atlanta and the Atlanta School Board increased over missed payments, and negotiations ensued over revising the TAD. The renegotiation of the BeltLine TAD served as the focus of this case study.

The renegotiations culminated on January 29, 2016 when the former Atlanta Mayor, Atlanta Public Schools superintendent, members of the Atlanta City Council, and the Atlanta School Board convened a press conference in Piedmont Park, just off the Atlanta Beltline's Eastside Trail. The occasion marked the end of the three-year-long dispute over the Tax Allocation District (TAD) funding the project. According to the front-page *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (AJC) article published the following day, the amended TAD symbolized a renewed partnership between the city and school district and represented continued support for the project (Bloom & Leslie, 2016). In the renegotiated TAD, the school district agreed to a more than half reduction of total payments than the original contract (\$73.5 million versus \$162 million).

While the 2016 AJC article marked the end of the political dispute, the policy issue at the center remains, as the BeltLine TAD is an example of neoliberal policy impacting education. The emergence of neoliberalism profoundly affected educational policy through shifts towards privatization, deregulation, and market-based solutions for all sectors. A large body of work continues to describe and theorize the components and effects of neoliberal policies in education (Au, 2007; Au & Ferrare, 2015; Ball, 2012; Dumas, 2013; Johnson, 2013; Lipman, 2011b; Nolan, 2015; Ross & Gibson, 2006; Saltman, 2014). Building on this work, further study into the negotiation of neoliberal policies affecting education is increasingly essential for cities, including Atlanta, that are utilizing revitalization mechanisms such as TADs. One avenue for understanding the production of neoliberal policy impacting education is examining how public discourse affects the policy process. Indeed, policy discourse simultaneously reveals and conceals motivations, intended benefactors/beneficiaries, and ideological priorities impacting lived experiences.

In addition to the issue of discursive constructions used to advance neoliberal policy, the BeltLine TAD renegotiation represented a shift in governance. Traditionally, democratically elected boards oversee districts providing public education, utilizing funds raised from local property taxes, state funding formulas, and federal allocations for schools serving economically disadvantaged students. Influenced by neoliberalism, many policies and contractual negotiations now involve actors outside of school boards, including city officials and private business leaders, as in the BeltLine renegotiations. In effect, tax dollars allocated for public education are put into circulation and shifted away from education and towards privately managed, non-educational uses. This study was based on the premise that these market-based influences on education warrant special consideration.

The BeltLine TAD troubles the notion that neoliberal policy solves social problems. Instead, it raises concerns over issues created by the redevelopment project, namely displacement and increasingly distant affordability for current residents. Unaffordability is of particular concern because Atlanta Public Schools serve many students who experience economic insecurity and are subsequently impacted by BeltLine-induced gentrification. The purpose of this study therefore was to understand how the media and policy makers discursively constructed the Belt-Line TAD. The objective was to gain a more in-depth understanding of the discursive constructions of projects like the BeltLine, viewing it as a necessary component towards pragmatic and ideological educational policy solutions.

### **Guiding Questions**

The objective was to critically examine the nature and impact of public discourse used to frame and advance public policies affecting education. To this end, I sought to problematize the policy process through the primary question:

1. What does discourse about the Atlanta BeltLine TAD renegotiation reveal about social practices around policy impacting education?

According to Bacchi (2015), to problematize is a form of critical analysis focused on understanding the social problems created by policy, that include how social issues are shaped and conceived by citizens, policymakers, and discourse. To consider the role of discourse in the policymaking process, I carried out a case study of the Atlanta Beltline TAD renegotiation. I examined the discourse of news articles and interviews conducted with policymakers and the resultant impact (stated and actual) on communities and schools. The secondary questions guiding the inquiry were:

2. What do retrospective accounts<sup>i</sup> of policymakers centrally involved reveal about convergences, divergences, and tensions during the BeltLine TAD renegotiation?
3. How do discursive representations of the BeltLine TAD renegotiation align with impacts on adjacent communities?

### **Situating the BeltLine TAD Renegotiations**

To understand the discourse surrounding city redevelopment projects impacting education, I decided to focus on the Beltline Tax Allocation District enacted between Atlanta Public Schools, the City of Atlanta, and The Beltline Corporation. I chose the BeltLine TAD for several reasons. First, it is geographically and economically large. Second, the project garnered international attention as a model for using TADs to enact city redevelopment. Third, a public dispute between the City of Atlanta and the Atlanta School board between 2013 and 2016 resulted in significant media attention on the topic. The study context includes tax allocation districts, the BeltLine, and the Atlanta Public Schools.

### ***Tax Allocation Districts***

TADs, or Tax Increment Financing, TIFs, are economic development mechanisms cities use for public redevelopment projects. Tax Allocation Districts are a public financing strategy in which cities borrow against future estimated increases in property tax revenue. By creating Tax Allocation Districts, city governments redirect increments in property tax revenue generated by a designated area, citing the need for development. Property tax increments support public redevelopment projects, such as by backing a bond. Tax Allocation Districts last for a set period, usually 20 years, after which the property tax revenue increments fund city and schools. The premise is that property tax revenue will dramatically increase post-redevelopment and benefit the broader tax base once the Allocation District ends.

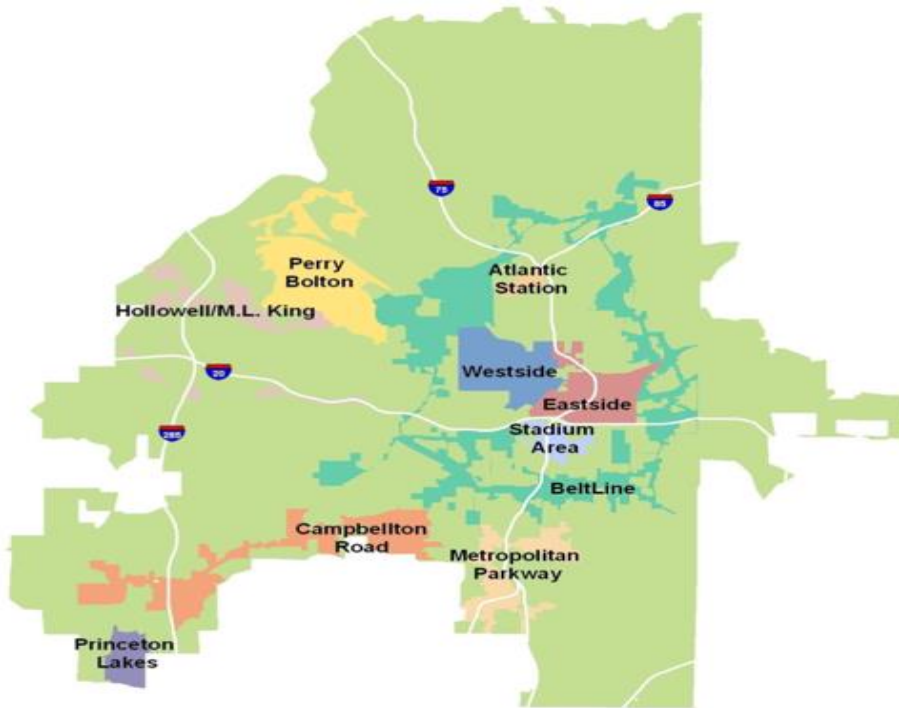
Almost every state allows incremental financing to fund redevelopment, and many major cities use the strategy. For example, TIFs encompass about a quarter of Chicago's geographic area, and according to Pauline Lipman (2011a), impact school closures, privatization, and support developing mixed-income housing. Many Tax Allocation Districts are tied up with the gentrification of the redeveloped space, changing who resides in the area. Critics of TIFs argue that development projects do not actually pay for themselves without any negative financial impact, due in part to increased property values after projects' completions (Greenbaum & Landers, 2014).

While cities frequently use TADs to fund development, they can be controversial for critics in part because TADs divert tax money away from school districts. A tax allocation district (TAD) uses increases in property taxes in the development area to fund projects such as the Atlanta BeltLine. School districts and city councils must agree to a TAD as they will give up a portion of taxes for a set period, usually 20 years (Greenbaum & Landers, 2014). Tax Allocation Districts directly impact a portion of the local property tax school districts receive. Despite the direct relationship, there is limited educational literature that focus on TADs/TIFs.

It is important to note that Tax Allocation Districts became legal in Georgia in 1985. Currently, Atlanta has six active TADs, including the Beltline, and four completed TADs (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Map of Atlanta's 10 TADs<sup>ii</sup>*



### **The Beltline TAD**

The Beltline is a neighborhood redevelopment project encompassing a 23-mile loop within Atlanta and 6,500 acres of land established in 2005 (Figure 2). As depicted in the map, the TAD borders encompass specific parcels of land. As Georgia law mandates, TADs may only include land that would not be development without such government intervention. As a result, the borders are not neatly drawn and often appear fragmented.



## Figure 2

*Map of the BeltLine Tax Allocation District<sup>iii</sup>*



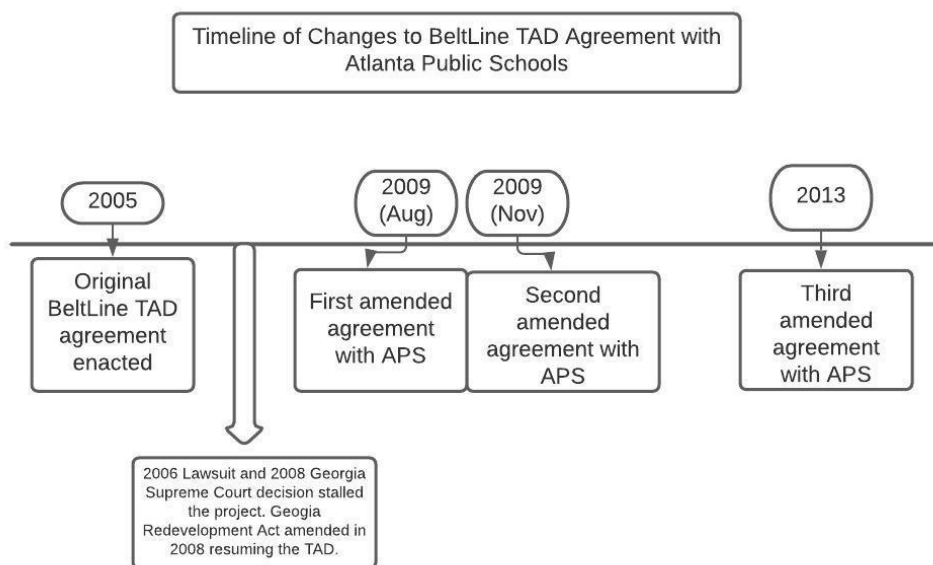
Atlantan Ryan Gravel’s master thesis that addressed transportation gaps across the city (Gravel, 1999) was the impetus for this project. Gravel proposed connecting 45 neighborhoods in Atlanta by converting a former railroad track to a walking and bike path. Gravel conjectured that the installation of this “Beltline” would facilitate mobility from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods often isolated to economically advantaged communities within the city. Championed by then city-council member Cathy Woolard, Gravel’s plan gained support among city leaders, including then mayor Shirley Franklin. When Fulton County, the City of Atlanta, and Atlanta Public Schools adopted the TAD in 2005, the project was projected to generate \$20 billion for the tax base and raise \$1.7 billion within the TAD over the 25 years (Atlanta Beltline, 2021). Based

on this projection, the BeltLine resolution stipulated that the City of Atlanta would make annual payments in lieu of taxes (PILOTs) to Atlanta Public Schools of \$7.5 million beginning in 2012 (Council, 2009).

The BeltLine TAD faced legal challenges in 2006 when Atlanta resident John Woodham filed a lawsuit claiming that using property tax increments for non-educational purposes was unconstitutional. In 2008 the Georgia Supreme Court ruled that TADs were unconstitutional. After this decision, voters approved an amendment to the Georgia Redevelopment Act supporting the use of TAD funding for redevelopment projects. A renegotiated 2009 TAD revised annual PILOTs to be incremental instead of fixed. However, the City of Atlanta missed the first yearly PILOT due in 2013, resulting in another round of negotiations to revise the TAD (Figure 3). Since 2016 when the city and school district entered the current, revised BeltLine TAD, a third of the BeltLine trail was built.

### Figure 3

#### *Timeline of BeltLine TAD Agreements with Atlanta Public Schools<sup>iv</sup>*



***Atlanta Beltline, Inc., and Invest Atlanta***

Signatories on the Beltline TAD include Atlanta Public Schools, the City of Atlanta, and Invest Atlanta, the city's economic development agency. According to their website, Invest Atlanta is a government authority led by a board of directors. This quasi-public governmental agency oversees city economic projects including managing the city's 10 TADs, opportunity zones, and creating incentives for developers within the city. To help manage the BeltLine TAD, Invest Atlanta formed the Atlanta BeltLine Inc. (ABI) in 2006 to oversee the project specifically (Beltline.org, 2018). (Brown, 2012), ABI is a quasi-public corporation, a public entity charged with managing the publicly funded, government-initiated project and led by an appointed board of directors. However, (Mead & Warren, 2016) claim that it is structured, organized, and run as a private corporation Another government entity (Invest Atlanta) formed ABI, which further distances city economic development from traditional public oversight. According to an interview with ABI's former president and CEO Paul Morris (Gamble & Heyda, 2015), ABI is

An independent, nonprofit, private development corporation chartered by the State of Georgia. We can receive public money and at the same time, because of our unique corporate structure, unlike any other entity that exists in Georgia, we can partner directly with private entities. (p. 159)

This description seems contradictory to ABI's definition in their financial disclosures as a public corporation that meets the requirements of a governmental entity. Thus, while Invest Atlanta is solely funded by the public, it describes itself as a private development corporation uniquely positioned to bypass traditional checks and balances to contract with private entities. Of importance to this dialogue is the sociopolitical and geographic context surrounding Atlanta Public Schools.

### *Atlanta Public Schools*

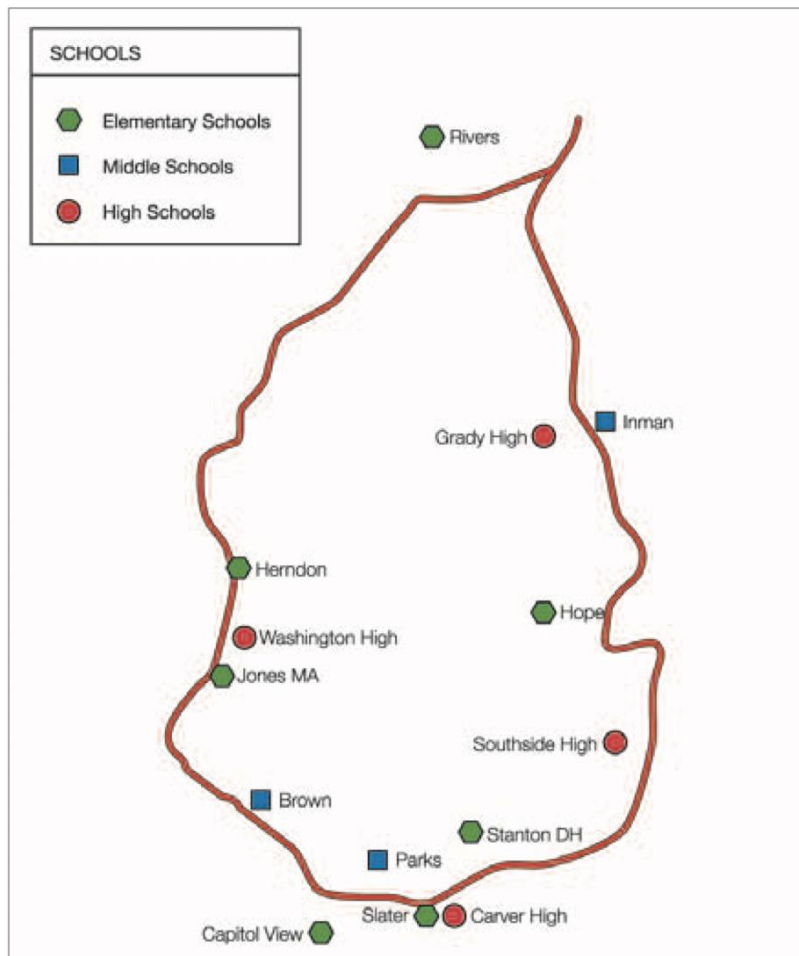
Atlanta Public Schools (APS) serves approximately 50,000 children in a region of 134 square miles. The district's operating budget for the 2020-2021 school year is \$866 million. According to the Georgia Department of Education (GADOE), 50,770 students were enrolled in APS in 2005, compared with 51,012 in 2020. While the population of students remains constant, the district's demographics have shifted over time (Kruse, 2005). The percentage of Black students decreased from 86% in 2005 to 72% in the 2020-2021 school year (GADOE, 2020). Conversely, White students served by the district increased from 8% in 2005 to 16% today. As a whole, 69% of the students in the district are eligible for free or reduced-priced meals. However, most (55) of the district's 88 schools enroll students who are 95%+ eligible for free and reduced lunch, indicating concentrations of affluence juxtaposed with concentrations of economic disinvestment across the district.

APS underwent much change over its 146 years of providing public education to the city's children. Impacted by economic and social policies triggering White flight and systemic disinvestment in the resultant city-centers, many schools in the district have historically and currently struggled. The Beltline project threatens dispossession due to high-end redevelopment, school closures, charter schools, and limited affordable housing. At the project's inception in 2005, 14 schools were located within a half mile of the BeltLine (Figure 4). Most BeltLine adjacent schools served predominately Black, economically excluded neighborhoods on the city's south side. The school district, the city, and private developers continue discussions about affordable housing in neighborhoods city schools serve. The Atlanta Beltline and resultant education and housing policies build on a long tradition in Atlanta of leveraging private interests to fuel

development and usher in changes to the organization of the school district, frequently around race (Kruse, 2005).

#### Figure 4

##### *BeltLine Adjacent Schools*<sup>v</sup>



#### Significance of the Study

Examining the discourse surrounding the BeltLine TAD renegotiation is important for several reasons. First, investigating the discursive construction of neoliberal policies further situates how they are legitimated and ultimately advanced in education. Secondly, a critical discourse study of the Atlanta Beltline as a case contributes to the literature on the impact of TADs

on school districts. Finally, this case study foregrounds the current gentrification-induced affordable housing crisis and displacement resulting from Beltline development in Atlanta. Ultimately, the focus is on the discourse used to negotiate policies impacting education positions scholars, activists, and community members to resist neoliberal policy. This is particularly important considering that neoliberal approaches are often subsequently appropriated as solutions to the problems created by the initial policy, enacting a circular policy process (Ball, 1998, 2012). For instance, the BeltLine project is currently featured on the U.S. Department of Transportation's website under the section "Center for Innovative Finance Support." The BeltLine is listed as a case study that "highlights the use of tax increment financing" (fhwa.dot.gov, 2021).

### ***Discourse in Neoliberal Educational Policy***

This study adds to scholarship concerned with discourse's role in legitimating educational policy. As Giroux (Giroux, 2004) argued, neoliberalism threatens to "limit the vocabulary and imagery available to recognize anti-democratic forms of power." (p. 492). A focus on language, vocabulary, and discourse directly connects to the policy possibilities within dominant circles of influence. Discourse is used to advance public policies involving education and offers possibilities to resist neoliberal policies in education via deeper understandings of the discourse used to position them publicly. A critical discourse studies approach centers on the language that policy and business actors use when framing policies (Au & Ferrare, 2014).

### ***TADs/TIFs and Educational Policy***

While the overall impact of TADs/TIFs on education is not the primary focus of this study, I chose this context intentionally. Despite the prevalent use of TADs and TIFs, their effect on local schools is under-studied in education. The BeltLine TADs encompasses an expansive

geographic area and is within a mile of 14 schools. TADs compound concerns about school funding. For instance, immediately after the BeltLine TAD was renegotiated, Atlanta Public Schools grappled with balancing sharp increases in property appraisals, resulting in calls for a reduction in the millage rate to offset the property tax burden for Atlanta homeowners. The millage rate represents the dollar amount for every \$1,000 of assessed property value that is collected by local government. In Atlanta, this property tax revenue is shared between the City of Atlanta and Atlanta Public Schools. Reducing millage rates to offset increased property tax bills due to increased appraisals eases the tax burden for constituents. However, in a blog post on the school district's website, former APS superintendent, Meria Carstarphen, explained that reductions could further strain the tax base because a significant portion of tax increments funnels into the 9 TADs instead of the public schools (meriacarstarphen.com, 2018).

Since 2006, TAD advocates have touted the Beltline as a model (Fausset, 2016). The project is featured prominently on high-profile websites, including the U.S. Department of Transportation's Center for Innovative Finance and MuniCap, Inc. that provided the bond backing the project. Examining neoliberal policy models and the discourse that frames them, is particularly important since they have implications far beyond the policy's original locality. Baker et al. (2016) traced how TIF policies were mobilized from their inception in California in the 1950s to cities across the United States to the United Kingdom. Finally, this case study offers implications for other TADs concerning impacts on schools directly and through changes to housing in Atlanta and other cities, such as the \$5 billion proposed Gulch TAD recently debated in Atlanta (Trubey, 2018; Trubey & Deere, 2018).

### ***The Beltline and New Policy Problems***

Within the context of neoliberal policy, the issues created by proposed solutions are paramount. This study discusses the dominant problems resulting from the BeltLine TAD. Beltline TAD will continue for 11 more years, and much of the project remains incomplete. Even though only a fraction of the project is complete, residents and organizations have raised serious concerns about the effect of gentrification, affordability, and displacement of original residents (Cooperative, 2017).

Affordable housing was a fundamental policy promise of the original and renegotiated Beltline TAD, and discourse around “affordable housing” played a central role in legitimating the policy. However, reports indicate that the BeltLine failed to meet the stated goals for affordable housing units and instead enacted increases in property-taxes pushing out homeowners in parts of the city (Mariano, 2017; Mariano et al., 2017). Consistent with many neoliberal policies, the Beltline TAD creates new social problems, such as gentrification, displacement, and access to amenities and community resources. This implication merits examination from perspectives that position policy as central in constructing social problems.

#### **Why Discourse?**

I wanted to understand the public discourse used to negotiate public policies impacting education since discourse plays a central role in legitimating public policies. Ball (1998) explained that “Most policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit and miss affairs that are reworked tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex processes of influence, text production, dissemination, and ultimately, re-creation in contexts of practice” (p. 126). Further examining these critical components of a policy is necessary to theorize policy negotiation, such as those central to the renegotiated BeltLine TAD.



The term discourse functions in multiple ways, two of which I use throughout this inquiry. In one sense, discourse is an abstract concept referring to the ideological framing used to describe social arrangements and phenomena. This abstract notion has no tangible output, and therefore, is continuously in motion. This broad, abstract idea of discourse is associated with how ideology and beliefs dictate how the world is constituted. This macro-conception of discourse contrasts with micro uses of discourse, which refer to individual pieces of text, spoken, written, or even visual. This use of discourse has a literal output that can be isolated, manipulated, and directly captured. Scholars of discourse distinguish discourse as a body of text, such as a complete article, conversation, or speech, versus an isolated piece of language (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). While the two conceptions are discreet, they simultaneously inform, enforce, reinforce, or reject the other.

Inquiry interested in the discourse used to frame and negotiate neoliberal educational policies relies on a both/and conception of the micro and macro notions of discourse. Therefore, moving between the two concepts is necessary to frame this case study of the Atlanta Beltline Tax Allocation District's renegotiation. The discourse used to negotiate public policies which divert public education taxes reveals the underpinnings of language, power, and knowledge (in the ideological sense). Fairclough and Wodak (1997) refer to this as the mutually constructive nature of discourse, explaining,

It constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it. (p. 258)

Discourse, therefore, is an entry point into understanding and explaining the policy at the center of this inquiry.

### **Researcher as Discursively Constructed**

Discourse studies are in part concerned with how macro-conceptions of discourse construct individuals and groups. My positionality and how I came to this project inform how I am discursively constituted. I argue for its importance since it impacts the design, implementation, and representation of this inquiry.

### ***Teach for America***

My affiliation with the educational reform program Teach for America (TFA) informs several layers of my positionality. TFA places college graduates in urban and rural areas, usually in communities different from their own. I am an outsider to Atlanta and the community where I teach, live, and research. Market-based neoliberalism informs TFA's strategy of enacting a circuit of virtually temporary teachers (2 years) as a purportedly more efficient solution to underfunded urban schools. This model negates structural factors impacting the current status of education and instead blames individual factors and supposes that the private sector can better manage teacher preparation (Brewer, 2016). Due to these arrangements, my affiliation creates proximity to local leaders also affiliated with Teach for America that provides privileged access to their perspectives. Through my entree into education via Teach for America, I have forged relationships with local education leaders, which provided opportunities for personal conversations and discussions about local educational policy, including those surrounding the Beltline TAD renegotiation. I came to reject TFA's mission structuring (Martin, 2015) and while this has not yet limited my access to policymakers also affiliated with TFA (including two of the participants in

this study), I am aware that my critiques could limit how forthcoming other TFA alum are in sharing their perspectives or assisting with research critical of the organization.

### ***Charter School Teacher***

I currently hold a 3rd-grade teaching position at a charter school that is a part of a local organization aimed at reforming communities. This charter school was the first in Atlanta. It opened after a prominent real-estate developer began “revitalizing” the neighborhood by forging public-private partnerships, replacing public housing units with privately managed mixed-income housing, and incentivized amenities. The structuring underpinning the creation of this school and the surrounding neighborhood is also neoliberal, as demonstrated by its privately managed public entities, such as schooling and housing. Notably, many of the same policy actors involved with creating my school are also involved with redevelopment projects across the city, including The Beltline. Like my affiliation with TFA, my position as a teacher at this school affords me proximity to policy actors currently participating in educational policy, directly and indirectly, in Atlanta. For instance, our Head of Schools offered to connect me with policymakers involved in the BeltLine TAD renegotiation. In addition to this networking, my schools’ reputation within local policy circles is very positive and could increase potential participants’ likelihood to help due to this affiliation.

### ***Critical Educational Policy Studies***

My perspective as a Ph.D. candidate is grounded in the social foundations of education, and I employ critical perspectives of policy and education. Through this experience, I continue to gain an understanding of the social factors that underpin current inequities. This perspective impacts how I view educational policies and institutions, as I primarily examine them from

perspectives critical of capitalism, neoliberalism, White supremacy, and anti-democratic practices. These critical perspectives complicate my concurrent affiliations with Teach for America and a charter school. Due to White privilege, I can critique these organizations (TFA and the charter school) with no consequence, an unearned advantage many of my non-White peers may not have.

### ***Whiteness***

Undergirding this triad of professional and organizational vantage points regarding the issue sits my identity as a White woman. Due to my inherent White privilege, I must continuously vet and reexamine my perspectives with a high degree of criticality. In doing so, I draw on theories of Whiteness (Alcoff, 1998; Frankenberg, 1997; Hytten & Adkins, 2001; Leonardo, 2002) and Miranda Fricker's (2007) conception of epistemic responsibility. From my privileged vantage point, I work to resist dysconscious racism (King, 1991) in my teaching and research by challenging dominant ideology reifying social inequality. As such, I work to acknowledge and examine how institutional structures, including schooling, maintain inequitable racial hierarchies impeding the aims of a just society.

I view Whiteness as structurally dominant ideologically and materially, as wielded, for instance, through Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993). I have a multi-faceted relationship with the content and context at the center of this study as an educator within the system, an alumnus of a nonprofit leader in educational reform, and a graduate student examining the affects and influences of reform. These perspectives are essential for engaging with this work, as this range of influences impacted the construction and implementation of the inquiry.

## **Overview of the Study**

Taken together, this inquiry into the discourse used to frame and publicly negotiate the Atlanta Beltline TAD offers the potential to examine a public redevelopment policy affecting education. Through this inquiry, I wanted to understand further the social changes related to practices around discourse used to describe policies, the accounts of actors involved, and the extent to which lived realities converge with how news media and policymakers discursively described outcomes. In Chapter 2, I detail literature related to housing and education, neoliberalism and educational policy, and analyses of Atlanta relevant to The Beltline TAD. Chapter 3 first explicates the theoretical underpinnings guiding this inquiry, and then I outline the critical discourse and critical policy studies approach and methodology used to carry out this case study. In Chapter 4, I discuss the major discursive constructions of the BeltLine TAD used in media articles and interviews with policymakers. Finally, in Chapter 5, I review the major findings of the study, discuss implications for educational leaders and researchers, and offer policy suggestions for city leaders

## 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

I drew on several bodies of literature that inform the policy issues surrounding the Atlanta BeltLine TAD and reflect the interdisciplinarity of the topic. Within this review, I outline the relevant theories and literature grounding my inquiry. To consider the discursive frames employed to legitimate the policy, I first draw on theories and findings that illuminate the macro-context of neoliberalism, urban renewal policies, and gentrification, especially market-based approaches to city redevelopment. Next, I situate the current study within scholarship theorizing Atlanta politics, including redevelopment across the city and resultant impacts on local housing and schooling. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of dominant metaphors and discursive framing used to legitimate neoliberal policies impacting education, including housing and city revitalization policies. The theories and sociohistorical contexts relevant to the BeltLine TAD informed not only the arc of the research project but also served as an analytic lens during the macro context phase of the critical discourse analytic process.

### **The Influence of Neoliberalism**

The policies and related political discourses at the focus of this study are ideologically neoliberal. Therefore, central to this inquiry are theoretical critiques and considerations of neoliberalism as it functions as an ideology (Ball, 2012; Brown, 2003; Harvey, 2005a; Ross & Gibson, 2006), enacting economics through politics and using the government to facilitate free-market capitalism. From its inception and dissemination by the Mont Pelerin society in 1947 (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2015), neoliberalism represented an often contradictory shift towards supporting markets while championing the free market through deregulation and subsequent capital accumulation (Eastman, 2017). Neoliberalism originated through the carefully constructed meeting of scholars in Europe opposing collectivism and socialism, who came to be known as the

Mount Pelerin Thought Collective. Although there were fundamental differences at the beginning, the underpinnings of the ideology were accelerated and widely disseminated, as triggered by specific historical events including World War II. Despite its ubiquity, neoliberalism cannot be easily and clearly defined. For example, there are multiple perspectives and economists such as Ordoliberalism, von Hayek, and Milton Freeman who are classified as neoliberal. However, the Mont Pelerin Society in their rejection of collectivism sought “an agenda diverging from classical liberalism” (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009, p. 6). This rejection resulted in a political system concerned with protecting the free flow of capital through state interventions. This underlying premise functions through several different structures and strategies more thoroughly discussed in the following sections.

According to Invest Atlanta (2021b), the city agency charged with executing the development projects and their associated bonds, Tax Allocation Districts are “areas with specific financing tools to incentivize development, helping the City of Atlanta grow and prosper” (Invest Atlanta, 2021, Tax Allocation District Financing section, para. 1). The discourse around incentivizing development indicates that Atlanta’s approach to TADs reflects neoliberal governance by facilitating private development through city interventions. The Invest Atlanta Website went on to cite the benefits of this approach, stating that the goal is to “strive to make Atlanta the most economically dynamic and competitive city in the world” (Invest Atlanta, 2021, About Us section, para. 2). Scholars have made it clear that neoliberal discourse features competition, privileging economic and business solutions, and incentivizing the private sector to meet the goals of public agencies more efficiently (Ball, 2012; Brown, 2003; Giroux, 2015).

Stephen Ball (2012) and Pauline Lipman (2011b) refer to the ‘neoliberal imaginary’ when considering the ideological component. According to Ball, the neoliberal imaginary assumes that the ideological struggle is over, a necessary assumption for this study. Posing as the only ideological option reduces potential policy critiques or rejections, as seen in “there is no alternative” discourse used to advance neoliberal concepts around marketization as common sense (Séville, 2017, p. 449). Further, Ball (2012) explained that neoliberalism functions as neutral and remains the dominant and mostly unchallenged political, economic, social, and moral ideology.

In addition to this overarching imaginary, neoliberal discourse constructs individuals reflective of the beliefs of neoliberal discourse to maintain economic and political structuring. As Wendy Brown (2003) pointed out, a function of the neoliberal state is producing the neoliberal citizen. Brown describes neoliberal citizens as “prudent” and “calculating” in their navigation of rational decision-making. Importantly, part of this construction is equating morality with an individual’s rational, market-based choices.

### ***Neoliberalism and Market-Based Solutions***

While the neoliberal imaginary uses market-based rationales for virtually all problems, the inner workings of neoliberal policy are separate from the free market. In contrast, the imaginary of “letting the market decide” conceals state-interventions to regulate in ways that facilitate the market. According to Berry (2014), neoliberalism’s adherence to the free-market and market-based solutions is “verging on the theological” (p. 2). Understanding the importance of the free-market from this vantage point illuminates the lengths taken to protect the free-market at seemingly any cost (Giroux, 2015; Séville, 2017), a consideration for analyzing discursive framing of the BeltLine TAD.



In effect, governments use market-based solutions to address the neglected social safety net, including developing or redeveloping space (Brenner & Theodore, 2005; Hackworth, 2007), such as the BeltLine project. Governments use public-private partnerships to build privately managed mixed-income housing and mixed-use developments to enact market-based solutions (Amy T. Khare, 2014; Fraser & Kick, 2007; Lipman, 2008). According to David Harvey (2004), capitalism faces overproduction, and neoliberalism offers a solution. To support the market even when faced with overproduction, Harvey theorized that a process of accumulation by dispossession ensues, destroying specific spaces to justify their subsequent re-accumulation. Accumulation by dispossession purports to create new capital by opening new markets. However, capital is not created but is merely rearranged and made available for capture by those doing the displacing, as seen in New Orleans (Buras, 2011; Johnson, 2015; Schein, 2006) and Chicago (Bennett et al., 2017; Lipman, 2011b). In effect, space is put in circulation. According to Lipsitz (2011), accumulation by dispossession accelerates capitalism and unjustly privileges White communities over Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities. The result of this process is uneven geographic development, in which some spaces hold the majority of resources at the expense of under-resourcing other areas (Harvey, 2005b). The implications of neoliberalism on urban geography compound racialized inequity through accumulation by dispossession and uneven development.

### ***Neoliberalism and Race***

Ideology and discourse are equally important in understanding, discussing, and theorizing the construct of race. Consistent with the neoliberal imaginary, the BeltLine TAD does not explicitly address race. Neoliberalism claims to address racial inequities while simultaneously using colorblind, race-neutral, or race-evasive discourse (Giroux, 2003; Nolan, 2015).

Neoliberalism complexifies approaches to ameliorating racial inequities through de-emphasizing identity categories and instead pushes meritocracy and individualism as explanatory for structural factors (Mahtani, 2010). According to Omi and Winant (2015), historical context mediates racial paradigms. Before neoliberalism took hold, the Civil Rights Movement relied on categories and expanding rights to those in said categories. By neutralizing categories and shifting responsibility to individuals instead of structural racism, neoliberalism further curtails efforts to address inequity. Mahtani (2010) explains that “neoliberalism effectively masks racism through its value-laden moral project: camouflaging practices anchored in an apparent meritocracy, making possible a utopic vision of society that is non-racialized” (p. 253).

Further, neoliberal discourse privileges individual merit and assumes a colorblind perspective. As Goldberg (2009) explained, “the increasing stress on individualized merit and ability in the name of gracelessness was coterminous with structural shifts in state formation away from welfarism and the caretaker state following the mid-1970s” (p. 331). This ideology influences many state structures affecting race, such as affirmative action (Bacchi, 1996; Torres, 2015). Ironically, as Giroux (2003) pointed out, colorblind rhetoric and beliefs run in tandem with the “spectacle of racial representations” (p. 192) in mass media.

Discourse exacerbates the avoidance of race within the neoliberal imaginary, as many discursive codes related to neoliberal concepts correspond with racial paradigms, including “urban,” “inner-city,” and “minority.” For example, “public” discursively invokes images of Black spaces, whereas “private” triggers notions of White spaces (Hohle, 2012; Lipsitz, 2011). These discursive cues are deeply ingrained, and neoliberal privileging of the private sphere exacerbates negative connotations with “public” and, therefore, Blackness. Ultimately, discursive invoking

racial codes advance neoliberalism when used to describe spaces targeted for accumulation by dispossession through gentrification. Debates over policies and practices causing gentrification often use racial codes to describe spaces to try to legitimize policy proposals and redevelopment. For example, in Atlanta, researchers found that public discourse over proposals to close a section of night-clubs in an affluent area of the city juxtaposed discourse of violence and danger with that in favor of upscale and high-end development (Hankins et al., 2012). Further, the effects of coded racialized discourse impact education through shifts in population, demographics, and policy. In one instance, researchers found that the number of charter schools often increases within gentrifying neighborhoods (Davis & Oakley, 2013), a shift that profoundly changes the educational landscape within a community.

In many ways, neoliberal ideology renders racial inequity secondary to economic inequality. When discourse positions economic inequality as the only barrier to achieving full participation in society within paradigms of meritocracy and individualism, structural oppression is minimized, further straining efforts towards the cause of racial justice. Giroux (2003) defines neoliberal racism as minimizing “race as a social force,” “focusing on individuals rather than on groups” (p. 200), and highlighting and condemning individual acts of prejudice while rejecting the existence of systemic racist structures. Neoliberal ideology and discourse uphold White supremacy and racism in part accomplished through displacement and uneven development (Soss et al., 2011).

### **Neoliberalism and the City**

Neoliberalism changed cities structurally through shifts in governance, geographically through mixed-income development, and ideologically through gentrification. Since neoliberal accumulation by dispossession requires “destroyed” space, many of the urban renewal projects

of the mid-twentieth century foregrounded the resultant legitimation and takeover characteristics of the most recent wave of city revitalization (Hackworth & Smith, 2001).

### *Urban Renewal*

TIFs and TADs traditionally use the term “blighted” to define which geographic spaces are eligible for redevelopment. The proliferations of TIFs and TADs beginning in the 1980s builds on urban renewable policies and initiatives between the 1940s and 1960s. The 1954 revision of the Housing Act of 1949 coined the term ‘urban renewal’. This term referred to policies intended to rebuild urban centers by providing public housing for the poor and increasing commercial business in urban centers that would attract White, middle-class residents (Henry & Hankins, 2012; Zipp, 2013). Much of the discourse associated with urban renewal policies relied on racially coded language impacting outcomes. Urban renewal policies also include terms such as “slums,” “slum clearance,” and “blight” used to categorize and classify spaces “qualifying” for renewal. These codes create a sense of urgency to transform urban centers and devalue both the space and the people that occupy them, along with their political power (Martin, 2007), cultural production (Fullilove, 2016), and working-class epistemologies (Woods, 1998).

Many subsequent housing policies related to urban renewal also impacted homeownership and access to affordable housing. These policies included the GI Bill of 1944, the New Deal, and the Housing Act of 1949. However, critics of renewal, including James Baldwin, equated renewal with the removal of non-Whites. According to Zipp (2013), the Housing Act of 1949 was intended to clean up slums, yet it displaced people of color and contributed to racial segregation. Zipp stated, “Displacement and racial injustice were the twin infelicities that would eventually besmirch the policy and practice of urban renewal, and idealistic reformers did not

adequately foresee this outcome” (p. 372). Indeed, the effects of urban renewal changed the landscape of cities across the United States, and resulted in racial segregation, displacement, and wealth gaps.

Like other cities, in Atlanta, many urban renewable efforts coincided with displacing Black residents. Substantial displacement resulted from infrastructure erected in the 1960s and exclusionary zoning and practices impacting racial segregation across city neighborhoods (Keating, 2001; Kruse, 2005). City and state leaders used federal urban renewal funds to build freeways in predominantly African American neighborhoods supporting the interests of the business community by facilitating access to the city center. Neighborhood groups and leadership expressed opposition to the deleterious impact of highways bifurcating communities and, as a result, displacing residents and disrupting neighborhood political power (Keating, 2001).

### ***Gentrification and Displacement***

According to Hall et al. (2014), gentrification is a mechanism of urban renewal that disrupts concentrated poverty by first disinvesting in the space and then reinvesting, displacing some original residents to make space for more affluent residents. Federal disinvestment in cities beginning in the 1980s, along with the influence of neoliberalism, accelerated gentrification, providing market-based rationales as policy solutions to facilitate urban renewal (Hackworth & Smith, 2001; Hackworth, 2007). In keeping with the neoliberal imaginary, government interventions often support gentrification, including shifts in zoning, deregulation, tax abatements, and TIF (Immergluck, 2009). Importantly, and in contrast to discursive framing, gentrification does not positively impact the economic realities of original residents but instead disperses people experiencing economic insecurity. In addition to shifting the population when people are displaced,

social networks are often also disrupted, further distancing people from the support that fills gaps created by economic disinvestment (Curley, 2009; Thompson et al., 2013). Moreover, social capital, displacement impacts the political power of residents too often kept at the fringes of the political process (Martin, 2007).

In Atlanta and other cities across the country, gentrification is more complex than affluent White residents taking over poor Black neighborhoods and sometimes entails middle-class White residents gentrifying a working-class White neighborhood (Martin, 2007) or upper-middle-class Black residents gentrifying a low-income Black neighborhood (Pattillo, 2007). The impact of class must be considered alongside historical racial segregation policies and practices. Through this lens, a more nuanced approach to gentrification reveals patterns impacting neighborhood demographics and related amenities, including schools.

Gentrification is an increasing issue across the city of Atlanta. Just the announcement of the BeltLine project resulted in significant increases in home values from 2006 to 2011, particularly on the city's Southside, a predominantly Black neighborhood with then median-family incomes around \$25,000 (Immergluck, 2009). After portions of the project reached completion, median home prices within the TAD rose from 2011 to 2015 from 40-60% (Immergluck & Balan, 2018). While the tax base increased in response, it also posed a risk to current homeowners on a fixed income faced with significantly higher property taxes. As construction on the remainder of the project continues, there are increasing concerns over affordability and resident displacement. These concerns are not just anecdotal. Researchers found that 60% of homes located in a neighborhood along the BeltLine's Westside Trail underwent some form of renovation or rejuvenation in only one year (2018 – 2019) (Aragón et al., 2020). Significant debates

surround the BeltLine's Bellwood Quarry Park project located in one of the most disinvested neighborhoods in Atlanta, the Grove Park neighborhood. Interest and involvement of high-profile corporations, developers, and community revitalization groups, including Microsoft and Purpose Built Communities, caused sharp increases in rent and home values leading to a 2020 moratorium on building permits to address affordable housing concerns (Peters, 2020).

### *Gentrification and Education*

Shifts in population impact schools in several ways: through potential increases to the tax base and economic and racial demographics changes. Gentrification significantly impacts local schools when long-term residents and families are displaced. In Southwest Atlanta, for instance, teachers grappling with the impact of both educational reforms and gentrification driving displacement of Black students and teachers have joined together to further understand the issue and resist the negative effects (Council et al., 2021). Schools also influence gentrification, and analysis provides insight into the ideology and discourse common among gentrifiers enacting neighborhood change. Pierce and Hankins (2019), from their study of Atlanta's Grant Park neighborhood, theorized that gentrifiers' consumption of city space also discursively reconstructs the city through ideological changes, including attitudes about schools.

Pattillo's study (2007) of upper-middle-class Black gentrifiers in Chicago echoed similar attitudes about schooling. Pattillo challenged the view that charter schools and magnet schools increase neighborhood desirability. She explained,

The public discourse of school reform always emphasizes improving educational options for all families, including low-income residents. The available reform tools, however -

schools with selective enrollment criteria, charter schools, small schools - make school reform more exclusive than its rhetoric suggests. (p. 150)

Public discourse positions schools as commodities available for increasingly affluent gentrifiers to consume which reshapes urban landscapes. For instance, in Chicago, Pauline Lipman (2008, 2011a) considered the influence of neoliberalism on public housing, public education, and gentrification of urban neighborhoods. According to Lipman, interest in the property available through converting traditional public housing projects to mixed-income developments led to widespread gentrification and school reform. This shift in housing legitimated educational reform that closed many “failing” public schools to establish mixed-income schools. The term “mixed-income” serves as a racial code, intimating that the presence of White people improves a neighborhood or a school.

Interest in “revitalizing” historically disinvested neighborhoods in Chicago resulted in a city-wide educational initiative, Renaissance 2010, that featured a plan to close almost 70 schools and open 100 new schools, with the majority being charter. Coupled with open enrollment in the district, the plan resulted in many children no longer having access to a neighborhood school and fierce competition for admittance to the elite “high-performing” charter schools. Problematically, researchers continue to find that low-income students do not always benefit from gentrifying schools, and their parents are often excluded from emerging social networks involved with decision-making at schools (Quarles & Butler, 2018). Many middle-class White families use charter schools to create enclaves separate from existing schools they view through deficit lenses, even when these actions contrast with their stated liberal politics calling for diversity and equity (Hankins, 2007; Roberts & Lakes, 2016).



Gentrification and education are intertwined and are mutually fueling. For example, the emergence of a charter school within gentrifying neighborhoods is common, and sometimes a new charter school propels gentrification. In a case study of two priority zone neighborhoods for charter schools in Atlanta, Andreyeva and Patrick (2017) found property value increased 6-8% more than surrounding neighborhoods over 25 years. In the case of the BeltLine, proximity to the development and parental status had an impact on residents' support for the project, despite increases in home values.

### **Atlanta Politics**

The Atlanta Beltline TAD renegotiation and the resultant impact on APS align with pro-business public policies used by the city of Atlanta beginning in the mid-twentieth century. In Atlanta, the historical socio-political context informs the larger political process. Its history, demographics, and dominant commerce shape Atlanta's identity as a mid-sized city and one of the most prominent cities in the Southeastern United States. Atlanta politics often overlap in structure and priority with those of other Sunbelt cities, yet it approaches politics with a unique style. Colloquially known as "the city too busy to hate" coined by former mayor William Hartsfield (Kruse, 2005), Atlanta politics leveraged its civil rights history and elite business class to grow economically. Atlanta is home to 16 Fortune 500 companies with an international profile due to the 1996 Olympics and its airport, the world's busiest.

The Atlanta political process hinges on a legacy of business and commerce coalescing with civil rights and social politics (Keating, 2001). From colonization to the present, race and economics have been intertwined in the South where the economy relied on White landowners enslaving Africans and their descendants. This exploitation led to wealth for White Southerners while simultaneously laying a foundation of White supremacy, racism, and discrimination that

continues to facilitate the economic system. This sociohistorical context weighs heavily on current political negotiations.

### ***The Atlanta Coalition***

The dominant theory of Atlanta politics derives from Clarence Stone's (1989) *Regime Politics*. Stone concluded that government is not enough to enact a policy agenda and instead requires sufficient resources and a coalition to enact change. Stone's study of Atlanta and theorizing about the urban regime characteristic of the local political process described a strong coalition between the White, downtown business elite, and upper-middle-class Black Atlantans. This biracial coalition collectively worked to enact a pro-business, economic growth, and development agenda since the mid-1950s (Stone, 1989), despite clashes with a working-class agenda (Hobson, 2017; Kruse, 2005; Levy, 2015). This coalition forged economic growth and development in the city center. The strong coalition comprising the urban regime impacted local politics, including mayoral leadership, since the mid-1950s (Kruse, 2005; Levy, 2015; Stone, 1989).

In her historical analysis of Black mayoral politics in Atlanta, Jessica Levy (2015) considered the economic and political factors facing Black mayors serving since the 1970s. Within his first term, Maynard Jackson shifted from a pro-labor stance to a pro-business approach. Notable and consistent with the broader effects of neoliberal policy, however, most of these benefits went to private developers and businesses directly servicing the newly expanded convention and tourism industry.

Following Maynard Jackson, Ambassador Andrew Young continued the pro-business and pro-tourism trend employing what he labeled "Public-purpose capitalism" (Levy, 2015, p. 430). This approach attempted to benefit wider social groups, namely lower-income Black Atlantans,

through government support of private development. Additionally, this approach included images of multicultural business leaders participating in the development. According to Levey, Young linked “civil rights with entrepreneurship” (p. 430). To be sure, not all Black leaders agreed with this approach, as evidenced by public debates between Hosea Williams and Maynard Jackson over the Atlanta Sanitation Worker’s Strike in 1977. Facing pressure from both the elite business class and the large Black electorate, political leaders in Atlanta often contend with achieving civil rights with entrepreneurship, as Ambassador Young assessed.

Subsequent administrations continued the pro-business tradition. Mayor Shirley Franklin was leading the city during the initial Beltline TAD creation. Mayor Kasim Reed again continued this legacy of leading with the city’s business interests at the forefront including in his work to renegotiate the Beltline TAD. The 2017 mayoral election focused on campaigns calling for commitments to serve all of Atlanta and work towards equity, indicating a potential shift away from the sole interests of White business elites. The BeltLine continued to be at the center of discussions about equity, affordability, and economic growth in Atlanta. This dilemma and the specific historical-regional context have implications for all aspects of public life, including public schooling.

*Regime Politics* contended that urban coalitions coalesce to support specific initiatives, which in Atlanta centered around economic growth and redevelopment. Keating (2001) reported that the coalition weakened under Mayor Ambassador Young’s tenure and instead shifted towards development, underscoring the importance of development as a policy priority in Atlanta. These historical dynamics certainly inform the present, particularly in the significance of race and a coalition with the business community. While several scholars have theorized Atlanta

politics, particularly Black Atlanta politics from the 1950s to the late 1980s, the subsequent period in which neoliberalism took hold is less considered. In an updated piece, Stone (2015) now contends that Regime Politics largely still holds. Still, the millennium ushered in globalization and subsequently fragmented the previously unified coalition (Stone, 2015), fissures exacerbated by tension due to increasing inequity (Raymond et al., 2016).

Grassroots and neighborhood politics across the city work to support or resist the overarching political agenda centered on economic growth and urban development. Black city-leadership almost always chooses the policy agendas of economic development within the elite business districts over neighborhoods outside of the more elite business districts, resulting in diverging racial support (Keating, 2001; Kruse, 2005; Martin, 2007). Gentrification further threatens the interests of working-class and middle-class neighborhoods, mostly comprised of Black residents across the south side of the city, through political displacement. Often political displacement occurs when an imbalance of gentrifiers replacing existing residents changes neighborhood association leadership and that of other community groups. As a result, displacement of political capital impacts who holds the power when making critical decisions for the neighborhood, including schools and development projects (Martin, 2007). In Atlanta, one source of neighborhood politics is the 25 NPUs (neighborhood planning units). Leaders make decisions that impact the jurisdiction, zoning, and other policy recommendations to the city council. According to Roy (2015), NPUs often serve as gatekeepers for aspiring city politicians and community support once elected.

### *Schooling and Housing in Atlanta*

Neoliberalism dominated Atlanta's policy and have been changing the organization of government institutions and the composition of neighborhoods since the mid 1980s (Levy, 2015). The discourse associated with these shifts must also accompany policy analysis and outcomes. Race also plays a significant factor in the privatization of space across the city. According to Kruse (2005), after forced desegregation, White Atlantans resisted by privatizing previously public spaces, including golf courses and swimming pools. The racist sentiments underpinning privatization spilled over into beliefs about taxes, particularly property taxes, the mechanism used to fund the Atlanta BeltLine TAD. Kruse said that "whites had bitterly resisted the sharing of both public space and municipal tax revenues with Blacks" (p. 629). Kruse pointed out that while Atlantans used a colorblind perspective, the politics around space and taxes are the same as those used previously to enact racial exclusion.

Schooling is also inexorably tied to housing policy since most school districts and zones are drawn based on neighborhoods. In the decade before the 2005 BeltLine, major housing shifts across the city impacted city schools. When Atlanta won the bid for the 1996 Centennial Olympics, a city-wide focus on urban renewal ensued. To prepare for the Olympics, Atlanta became the first major metropolitan city to utilize federal Hope VI grants, effectively dismantling all public housing projects in favor of privately contracted, mixed-income communities (Atlanta Housing Authority, 2011). The result of this shift towards marketization and privatization of the public sphere led to the displacement of low-income residents who were disproportionately Black compared to the overall city demographics (Gustafson, 2013; Hankins et al., 2014; Oakley et al., 2008). Before the AHA closed all public housing projects, each neighborhood had an

elementary school. These schools closed when the projects were closed. Enrollment at nearby schools was further affected by the population shift due to relocation. Many schools on the south side of Atlanta have been closed, including 14 since the latest redistricting in 2012.

Many APS schools on the Southside continue to face threats of closure. However, the most significant shift in the recent decade involves charter schools. Since the first charter school opened in 2000, 10 more have followed. Charter schools continue to open despite declining enrollment in many traditional neighborhood schools. Unlike many other urban cities such as New Orleans, Chicago, and Philadelphia (Davis & Oakley, 2013), charter schools make up a relatively small portion of the district. In 2016 as part of APS's "turnaround strategy," the district agreed to turn over a cluster of their schools in a low-income, predominantly Black neighborhood to a charter school operator (Purpose Built Schools, 2016). The contract represented a quasi-approach to charter schools, with the traditional autonomy given to charters but with the requirement that the schools enroll all students in the zoned district. Consistent with the structure of Atlanta politics, the contract represented a coalition of elite White business leaders and philanthropists and African American leadership. A prominent developer and philanthropist, who was also involved with the BeltLine project, raised private funds for Boston Consulting to provide recommendations to APS for their turnaround plan. The same philanthropist then created a charter school operator, Purpose Built Schools, and APS became their first contract, despite criticism from grassroots organizers (Sen, 2016). Three of the schools operated by Purpose Built Schools are on the BeltLine (out of 14 total schools on the BeltLine in all).

### **Discursive Framings of Neoliberal Policy**

The discursive framing of social and educational problems leverages the direction of resultant debate and policies adopted as solutions. According to Emery (2016), "policy is done in

and through ‘discourse driven’ ideas of social change” (p. 21). In this section, I discuss relevant discursive framing theory of neoliberal policy, mainly related to urban redevelopment and educational policy. Prominent discursive frames include color-evasiveness, neoliberal tenets reflective of marketization, appropriation of social justice and civil rights, and using metaphors to describe problems.

Discursive framing of neoliberal redevelopment projects and policies often uses race-neutral and color-evasive language, despite impacting racial inequality (Gillborn, 2005; Mele, 2013; Nolan, 2015). Further, this racially-coded language enacts a process within discursive constructions of urban development that Mele (2019) refers to as “racialization.” By analyzing discourse about redevelopment in a low-income Toronto neighborhood, Mele found that discourse about revitalization supported mixed-income development and disassociated poverty with systemic racism. Discourse centered on “restoring city competitiveness,” a phrase that emphasized the economic core of neoliberalism. However, while neoliberalism purports to champion competition and the “free” market, discourse can reveal other motivations for policy changes. As it relates to neighborhood redevelopment, Hankins et al. (2012) found that race played a role in legitimating which development projects are deemed acceptable. In their analysis of imposed regulations to stop the Buckhead nightclub scene in the 2000s, they concluded that “accumulation shifted from a primary focus on money capital towards one of symbolic cultural capital (i.e., privilege)” (p. 394). In other words, even though the Buckhead nightclub scene supported the city’s economic growth agenda, racial privilege overruled the development in favor of maintaining historical race and class stratification in the neighborhood.

While discursive framing of racial and economic equality shifts to reflect current conceptions, many housing, neighborhood revitalization, and educational policies, particularly at the onset of the twenty-first century, relied on morality to justify public aid (Jacobs & Manzi, 1996). For example, Marston (2000) found that public-housing discourse relied on notions of “deserving,” which enacted moral power over residents and discursively stratified who was eligible for assistance. In Atlanta, Goetz (2013) reported that city discourse framed the “concentrated poverty” within public housing as “toxic” and pathologized residents. Such discourse in Atlanta legitimized demolition in favor of neoliberal solutions, namely using HOPE VI funds to finance “revitalization” through mixed-income housing. Only residents discursively considered morally deserving were allowed to return to the privately-developed communities (Keating, 2001). Other cities followed Atlanta’s approach to urban revitalization, and those city leaders used similar discursive constructions to legitimize the revitalization of public housing across the country (Pfeiffer, 2006).

Relatedly, scholars found that discursive frames about neoliberal policy position social justice as an added benefit instead of the primary goal. Economic interests take center stage, often through the support of high-profile policy-sponsors, coalescing large-scale “policy-networks” in which neoliberal policy is exported globally (Ball, 2012). Au (2009) found that wealthy elites rallied together to garner support for a charter school amendment in Washington State financially and discursively through public images of “credit by association,” or the positive marketing effect of public backing by well-known public figures, such as Bill Gates. Barnes et al. (2016) revealed patterns within TFA publications of primary serving of the desires of elite partners and a secondary emphasis on the corps members involved with the program. The interplay of elite



“policy sponsors” (Au & Ferrare, 2014) endorsing neoliberal policy using their perceived business savvy as credibility now impacts the discourse. The influence of policy sponsors and their agendas often lead the direction of urban regimes guiding local politics.

Economic metaphors often used in discourse about revitalizing urban spaces also shape ideological constructions of how change best occurs. For instance, business discourse often infiltrates the public sphere, including positions like the housing authority’s CFO.

Another discursive tactic in framing neoliberal solutions to social problems relies on appropriation to evoke support for policies due to false equivocation. Building on positioning social justice as an additional benefit, allusions to the civil rights movement are used to advance neoliberal policy, despite significant diversions of intent and outcomes (Hernandez, 2016). Within educational discourse and neighborhood revitalization discourse, there are frequent nods to civil rights. Within discourse about housing and neighborhood revitalization, the pervasive use of the term affordability (Jacobs & Manzi, 1996) buoys support while masking policy details since there is little consensus on what “affordable” means. In Atlanta, Roy (2015) found that the Belt-Line planning process co-opted democratic engagement and “discursively reinforces the idea that equality is possible to achieve within the planning process without achieving broader socio-economic equality” (p. 65).

Affordability discourse increased significantly post the 2008 recession and necessitated the renegotiation of the BeltLine TAD. News discourse about the recession, particularly in reporting about the Wall Street bailout, used metaphors to address the seeming complexity of the problem, comparing the economic rupture to a natural disaster, nuclear disaster, or illness (Horner, 2011). While metaphors used differed according to political attitudes towards the

economy, Horner (2011) found that news discourse did not deny a need for a bailout, harkening to TINA (there is no alternative) neoliberal discourse.

***Neoliberal Discourse in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution***

The newspaper with the largest readership in Atlanta, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, is owned by Cox Enterprises, whose philanthropic arm is deeply involved in educational initiatives across the city and is the largest private funder of the Atlanta BeltLine (Atlanta, 2010). In Atlanta, there is evidence that local newspaper reporting in the AJC shows bias towards neoliberal policy in education, specifically in their coverage of local charter schools. Hankins and Martin (2006) found that the AJC used neoliberal discursive frames to describe charter schools, including choice and freedom, accountability, and contrasting with traditional bureaucracy. Further, the AJC used market-based language and positioned parents as consumers of their children's education. Finally, specific job-training served as a pro-charter school discursive frame in the AJC, underscoring the neoliberal value of economic growth. They concluded that 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. (Hankins et al, 2006, p. 534)

In addition to influencing political attitudes and ideology, news discourse impacts city and policy outcomes. For instance, Immergluck (2009) identified a relationship between news articles in the AJC announcing and discussing the BeltLine project from 2004 to 2006 and subsequent increases in home prices around the BeltLine, particularly in Black neighborhoods experiencing economic disinvestment across the city's southside neighborhoods. Notably, the

discursive framing of neoliberalism often works in tandem to support policy that simultaneously reflects a market-based ideology that often fuels racial and economic inequity. The dominant discursive constructions of social issues and proposed neoliberal policy solutions contrast with discourse within the African-American-led news media (Browne et al., 2016).

In all, literature relevant to discourse about the BeltLine TAD negotiation include policy issues involving neoliberalism and changes to the urban landscape, a political context in Atlanta characterized by a legacy of public-private partnership, and discourse using color-evasiveness and market-based rationales to garner support for neoliberal policy. These findings informed this study by offering relevant theses and considerations for the BeltLine TAD and contextualized the policy. Building on this literature, I next drew from the critical theories undergirding the study to craft a methodology to analyze the policy questions at the center of inquiry.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

This inquiry focused on the discursive framing of policy impacting education. To investigate, I studied one such example as a case study, the Atlanta BeltLine TAD renegotiation. The primary research question considered discourse about the BeltLine TAD renegotiation. I also examined retrospective accounts of policy actors involved and the convergences, divergences, and tensions their perspectives revealed about the renegotiation. Finally, I juxtaposed discursive representations of the BeltLine TAD renegotiation with impacts on adjacent communities. Since this inquiry examined policy and discourse, I drew on Critical Policy Studies (CPS) and Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) in crafting the methodology. Neither subscribes to a specific framework or methodology. Therefore, my approach reflected an interdisciplinary examination within CPS and CDA, allowing for reflexivity with the critical theoretical framework undergirding the study. I understood methodology as “the theory of how inquiry should proceed” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 193) and carefully attended to the links connecting the perspectives guiding inquiry and the procedures employed to address the research questions aligned with a CPS and CDS approach. In this chapter, I first review these frameworks and the related assumptions I made throughout the analysis. Next, I discuss each methodological approach’s unifying aims and distinctions, and epistemological considerations. Finally, I discuss the decisions made related to data collection and analysis methods, participants, delimitations, and ethical considerations.

#### **Critical Theories: Examinations of Power**

I came to this study influenced by critical theorists examining how ideology legitimates inequitable power distributions. In considering the issue of the BeltLine TAD, I focused on the power-laden nature of policy and ideological underpinnings that reproduce current social stratification. Within a critical tradition, Giroux (2011) explained that “Critique focuses largely on how

domination manifests as both a symbolic and an institutional force and the ways in which it impacts on all levels of society” (p. 4). This study’s context required a framework with an interdisciplinary perspective and specific attention to how power is reproduced and leveraged. In crafting my approach, I drew on critical perspectives considering race (Leonardo, 2002; Alcoff, 2007; Frankenberg, 1993), space and dispossession (Harvey, 2005; Lipsitz, 2011(Fullilove, 2016)), and discourse (Fairclough, 1989; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Critical theories situate policy issues within larger ideological structures that permeate all aspects of social interactions and institutions while providing a counter-lens for alternative conceptions resisting structural oppression.

### *Theorizing Race*

I centered race and Whiteness during analysis to critique discourse reproducing structural inequity. I drew from Whiteness Studies not because the participants are primarily White but rather as a theoretical lens to examine racial injustice within policy (Leonardo, 2002) and to confront the bias I bring to the study as a White woman. In theorizing race, I understand Whiteness as a social construct, a racial identity that is intrinsically linked and dependent on Blackness (Coates, 2017). As a social construct, Whiteness relies on this subjective othering to enact a system in which power is wielded to unjustly advantage White people. First, I assume that racism is inherent in American society. Charles Mills (1997) argued that this constant in American society represents a tacit agreement among those in power. An epistemology of ignorance undergirds White supremacy, minimizing racist legacies (Alcoff, 2007; Mills, 1997; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). Mills conceived ignorance as an intentional system that actively resists knowledge and fiercely advances propaganda as knowledge.

Secondly, I assume that Whiteness denies racism. Leonardo (2009) contended that Whiteness is unwilling to name racism and operates under the guise of anonymity and neutrality (Bonilla-Silva, 2012; Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Matias, 2016). In contrast, critiquing Whiteness requires naming White normatively, whereby White culture, beliefs, or people are privileged while minimizing Black, Latino, Asian, and Indigenous perspectives. When confronted with racism, White victimization upholds White privilege (DiAngelo, 2018; Leonardo, 2002) and rejects responsibility for racial inequality. Despite White people's tendency to avoid directly speaking about race, we interact with race by making the problem external from ourselves while attempting to assume race-neutral positions (Frankenberg, 1993). White people tend to juxtapose their self-identified "goodness" as evidence of being anti-racist (DiAngelo, 2018; Matias et al., 2014; Sullivan, 2007). Mills (1997) pointed out that a fierce sense of individualism is characteristic of White identity, a tenet permeating dominant classical and political philosophy, and neoliberalism. Since discourse is the focus of this study, I specifically attended to how language reinforces and reproduces White supremacy. A Whiteness studies framework helped me resist treating race as a neutral construct or unintentional outcome of policy and instead assume that policy reflects a racist society.

### *Theorizing Space*

In analyzing discourse about the Atlanta BeltLine TAD, I drew on critical geography and attended to discursive constructions of space (Harvey, 2006; Knox & McCarthy, 2012; Schein, 2006; Soja, 1989). This critical geographic perspective utilizes Harvey's (2006) theorizing around accumulation by dispossession, in which discursive frames are leveraged to put spaces into circulation by first displacing what is currently there so that an area can in turn be

accumulated for profit by someone else. When considering the resultant impact on communities most targeted by dispossession through means such as the Urban Renewal act and other state-led efforts, I draw on theories that center the impact on working-class and Black communities most impacted (Fullilove, 2016; Martin, 2007; Woods, 1998). In theorizing about these constructions, Lipsitz (2011) contrasted the “white spatial imaginary” and the “Black spatial imaginary.” These imaginaries manifest in material value or lack thereof, as evidenced by racial disparities in property values and growth (Raymond et al., 2016). Lipsitz (2011) described the white spatial imaginary as a function of systematic exclusion and hoarding resources. A White special imaginary contrasts with what Lipsitz conceptualized as the Black spatial imaginary, places of resistance, and resilience to long-term efforts by Whites to exclude and pathologize Black communities. Relatedly, Leonardo and Hunter (2009) outlined the imaginary constructed around three central conceptions of the “urban,” ranging from sophisticated to jungle to “authentic cultural practices” (p.150). Perpetuated by news media and popular culture representations, urban spaces are frequently presented as deviant, culturally pathological, and deeply steeped in deficit stereotyping. These images are often competing, do not function in binaries, and represent our society’s more significant ideologies. Haymes (1995) also described the connection between ideology and the urban imaginary, saying, “The white supremacist thinking and attitudes that undergird urban mythologies about blacks have resulted in their spatial regulation and control in cities” (p. 5). This control manifests in many public policies, such as public housing, education, and policing. Through these policies, uneven development of space wields power and control, often through discourse.

### *Theorizing Discourse*

Critical discourse studies closely attend to language and positions discourse as a critical mode of revealing and transmitting ideology. According to Fairclough and Wodak (1997), “Discursive practices may have major ideological effects - that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations” (p. 258). Throughout this study, I assume that discourse maintains and creates power structures, which Fairclough (1989) described as “power in discourse and power behind discourse” (p. 43). “Power in discourse” has to do with “powerful participants controlling and constraining the contributions of non-powerful participants” (p.46). Our identities are discursively constructed and ranked in power and authority and used as a strategic tool to restrict. As Fairclough points out, “power in discourse” is asynchronous in that the parties involved are not in conversation or even the same space, such as in the media, which is my focus in this study. The second consideration of power is who is behind the discourse, a very important aspect of this study since media excerpts served as a primary data source. In an era most influenced by capitalism, those who have the most to gain within this system are also concerned with discourse related to achieving this aim. Discourses of efficiency, individualism, deregulation, and accountability fuel the power behind capitalism and neoliberalism. In this study, I distinguished discourse from knowledge. As Fairclough (1989) warned, without this distinction, considerations of discourse may falsely claim to be describing knowledge while describing ideology. As a theoretical approach, critical discourse studies view language as a component of social interaction that produces action and therefore wields power.



Critical discourse studies assume text, including policy, is non-neutral and is instead laden with ideological and political viewpoints that influence the construction and meaning. Fairclough and Wodak (1997) explained,

Discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it. (p. 258)

### ***Theorizing Policy***

A critical perspective rejects the stage-heuristic model, or rational approach to policy-making that utilizes a fixed and ordered process to identify the one best solution to address a neutrally-conceived problem (Stone, 2002). In contrast, a critical vantage point understands policies as inherently political, both reflecting and constructing social problems. As such, I assume that policy functions as a tool wielding power required to maintain inequitable social stratification. Levinson et al. (2009) pointed out that “most critical approaches suggest that policy, even in the most apparently democratic polity or institution, codifies and extends the interests of those who disproportionately wield power” (p. 769). Within the tradition of critical policy studies, I centered examinations of resistance that identify and recognize how people, primarily working class Black people, agentively protest unjust policies through micro acts of resistance in addition to larger collective action (Kelley, 2002).

Secondly, in drawing on the critical perspectives underpinning this study, I assumed that policy encompasses more than the text comprising policy documents, but rather includes the unwritten social practices, causes and consequences (intended or unintended), and structures built

to enact, maintain, and carry out specific policies. Drawing on an ecological perspective of policy, I consider policy as a nested within the “actors, relationships, environments and structures, and processes” surrounding the creation and actualization of a policy text (Weaver-Hightower, 2008, pp. 155-156). Within these components, I assumed that policy is fraught with paradoxes, in which the stated aims and benefactors often do not align with motivations. As policy reflects and reinforces dominant ideology, most policy over the past 40 years reflects neoliberalism.

The critical perspectives and assumptions informing this study understand social institutions and related problems as constituted by ideologies maintained and produced by power. The manifestations of power, while covert in operation, results in tangible effects for those involved. This theoretical framing reveals the inner workings of power, ideology, and resultant social stratification and ultimately hopes to resist and recapture power for those currently quieted, constricted, and oppressed.

Ultimately, scholars drawing on critical perspectives must consider their work’s ability to impact systems influenced by social ideologies that reproduce uneven power distribution. While critical research likely cannot fully ameliorate injustice, it promises to theorize further how oppressive ideologies, governance structures, and institutions operate. Increased understanding of how these processes occur creates opportunities for resisting individual policies and institutional decisions, creating fissures in the status quo. Hence, they seemed ideal for achieving the goals of this study.

### **A Critical Policy and Critical Discourse Approach**

Informed by this critical framework, my methodological approach combined critical policy studies and critical discourse studies. Both perspectives support interdisciplinary research and

center the role of social context, including ideology and power distribution, with careful attention to how language frames social problems.

### ***Critical Policy Studies***

Critical policy studies (CPS) as a methodological lens identifies social practices within policymaking reproducing social inequity (Maarten Simons, 2009; Weaver-Hightower, 2008). A CPS approach offers a lens that describes how power functions within policy while rejecting claims of neutrality. A CPS approach assumes that policy is not made in isolation but is contextually and ideologically laden. Weaver-Hightower (2008) called for a policy ecology metaphor that “centers on a particular policy or related group of policies, both as texts and as discourses, situated within the environment of their creation and implementation” (p. 155). Situating policy within a critical perspective calls for considering policy alongside the larger sociopolitical context.

Guided by CPS, I assumed that the policy process is just as reliant on the politics that define a problem as the solutions offered (Maarten Simons, 2009). Important for examining the BeltLine TAD, CPS contends that social problems become politicized by discourse representing the problem. Bacchi (2009) likened CPS to a process of problematizing, in which policy analysis shifts away from providing solutions to problems and instead asks how and why those problems came to be. A problematizing approach examines how policy constitutes social problems (Bacchi, 2009). Problematizing positions proposed policy solutions as texts which reveal motivations and underpinnings that illuminate the issue.

### *Critical Discourse Studies*

Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) share many of the same aims as CPS: a methodological lens focused on understanding and interpreting how discourse politicizes and constructs problems (Fairclough, 2013a). Traditional discourse studies predominately draw on textual analysis to answer questions about language use. In contrast, CDS situates analysis within social theories and seeks to understand social configurations and power relations (Fairclough, 1989, 2013b; Weiss & Wodak, 2003; Wodak, 2015). Careful consideration of the discourse publicly employed to frame the Atlanta BeltLine TAD renegotiation required an approach to trace how ideology and power permeated the policy.

There is not a single CDS methodological framework, but instead guiding assumptions that unify a variety of interdisciplinary methodologies considered CDS (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Van Dijk (2001) contended that CDS “is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (p. 352). From a CDS perspective, I considered how discourse conveys meaning. A tenet of CDS is that texts (written, spoken, or visual) depend on the broader context to fill in the unwritten/spoken/or visualized elements of each text. CDA also considers what is absent from discourse to contextualize the discourse more fully. My analytic focus was less concerned with individual words, mechanics, and usage but centered instead on larger pieces of text/spoken language/images (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). According to Mulderrig (2017), “Through detailed textual and contextual analysis, it highlights ways of using language that variously reproduce and transform social practices, and in doing so help privilege certain ways of doing, thinking, and being over others” (p. 460).

Fairclough called for methodological choices focused on how discourse informs, impacts, or reflects social change. Research questions about social practices and changes around policies tend to draw on Fairclough's three-tiered approach (Barnes et al., 2016; Emery, 2016; Nolan, 2015). Since the issues at the center of this study focus on discursive shifts in policy discourse in education (The Atlanta BeltLine TAD renegotiation), Fairclough's dialectical approach primarily informed methodological choices. In describing a CDS methodology, Wodak and Meyer (2016) explained that analysis should be "systematic and reproducible" in its treatment of data, meaning that the specific methods of analysis are clearly detailed and explained step by step to transparently outline how data were considered (p. 4). I drew on Bacchi's (2009) framework to examine how discourse framed the Atlanta BeltLine TAD. In addition, Fairclough's three-tiered approach to discourse (social context, text content, and production/usage) (2013) allowed me to analyze the data systematically and with some degree of transparency.

### **Epistemological Considerations**

While critical theories and related methodologies seek to examine the role of power in social issues, the philosophical underpinnings create important distinctions and further inform methodological choices. Discourse is chiefly responsible for representing and communicating our ideas and, relatedly, what we think we know. Additionally, discourse is a central mode that transmits knowledge and ideas. While discourse does not change what is true, it does impact what is knowable by restricting and controlling language available for production and widely disseminated discourse. Foucault (1995) posited that discourse, and the knowledge it produces, are intertwined with power, referring to the two concepts as one: Power/Knowledge. Discourse often functions as an impediment to knowing. Power can discursively shape and dictate who are knowers, what is known and worth knowing, and what is absent from conversations about truth

and phenomena altogether. Critical theory and most conceptions of CDA are concerned with practices, discourses, and institutions that elites establish and subsequently structure to their advantage. For instance, Fairclough et al. (2002), argued for a critical realist stance that acknowledges a societal reality alongside conceptions of social construction.

Along with and related to notions of power, epistemic claims and the discourse used to advance them are related to other vantage points. Lorraine Code (2017) explained,

Like all human practices, knowing is situated within and enabled or thwarted by material, political, geographical, situational, cultural, and other factors, many of which are integral to assessing and/or implementing knowledgeable beliefs and actions, and many of which evoke matters of responsibility. (p. 93)

Situating “knowing” as influenced by experiences shaped by power is essential when evaluating knowledge claims and the discourse framing them. As Miranda Fricker (2007) argued, a speaker’s identity mediates the degree that their discourse is considered. Fricker highlights the role of power in constricting knowledge claims through the duality of “epistemic excess” whereby society attributes unearned value on discourse from privileged positionalities and “epistemic injustice,” whereby society minimizes discourse from marginalized positionalities.

Critical discourse studies provide useful constructs for moving the educational policy process towards more just and democratic conceptions. As Bernstein (1996) pointed out, discourse impacts what is knowable through its constant interactive interaction with reflecting and producing ideology. From a policy perspective, the epistemic impact of discourse in shaping what is knowable informs how the policy process accomplishes specific aims and provides a

beginning point for how to expand the current aims and goals limited to the discursive status-quo. If what is knowable expands, so too might policies.

Further, philosophical and methodological approaches grounded in understanding discourse face concerns about whether these forms of analysis capture reality and/or truth. Analyzing discourse does not attempt to describe reality and/or lived experiences. Instead, it seeks to understand how discourse influences how phenomena are constructed and often known, influencing future action and epistemic claims, even when arrived at unjustly. The reticence of critical policy studies and critical discourse studies to subscribe to a specific methodology is partly due to their interdisciplinary nature and a nod to their epistemological underpinnings. These approaches reject objective knowledge claims purporting to derive the truth by adhering to specific methods to ensure validity. These critical approaches are rooted in epistemic stances that understand knowledge to be socially mediated and constructed, requiring analysis alongside context.

### **Research Design and Methods**

I used case study design informed by CPS and CDS to consider discourse about the Atlanta BeltLine TAD after the city of Atlanta defaulted on the payments stipulated by the original policy. Case study design allowed for in-depth understanding and theorizing of a specific instance (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2012) and provided an opportunity to consider how discourse impacts neoliberal educational policy more broadly (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). As Fairclough (2013a) explained, CDS as a method complements CPS since it offers “a recognition of the discursive (or semiotic, or linguistic) character of policy, policy-making and policy-analysis which broadly aligns them with anti-positivist and interpretative positions within policy studies” (p. 1). This perspective allows for in-depth consideration of the discourse and accounts of policymakers

involved with the BeltLine TAD renegotiation between 2013 and 2016, the specific case that was the focus of this study.

### ***Data Collection Methods and Data Sources***

City redevelopment projects, such as the BeltLine, impact education from multiple policy vantage points, including shifts in housing (gentrification, reallocation, etc.), funding (tax allocation districts, school closures), and infrastructure. I therefore drew on multiple data sources to understand how the renegotiation was discursively framed. According to Wodak and Meyer (2016), using a variety of sources strengthens CDS methodology.

**Documents: Media Articles.** During the first phase of data collection, I identified media articles about the BeltLine TAD renegotiation. To collect documents, I searched the following databases: AJCText Archive, Nexis Uni; PRO Question Central; Atlanta Business Chronicle; Atlanta Magazine (via Google Site Search); Atlanta Voice in GSU library archives; Atlanta Daily World in GSU library archives; Creative Loafing (via Google Site Search); and the City of Atlanta (via Google Site Search). For each database, I ran searches using the following terms within the dates of January 1, 2013 and January 31, 2016: Atlanta BeltLine, Atlanta AND Tax Allocation District, Atlanta Public Schools AND City of Atlanta, and Atlanta AND BeltLine AND Negotiation. Articles were relevant if they included a direct or indirect reference to the impact of the BeltLine TAD on schools, neighborhoods, or the city. Through this search, I found 66 relevant articles that I uploaded to NVivo for data analysis. It is important to note that the local African American newspapers and magazines searched (Atlanta Voice and Atlanta Daily World) did not have any articles about the BeltLine TAD renegotiation.



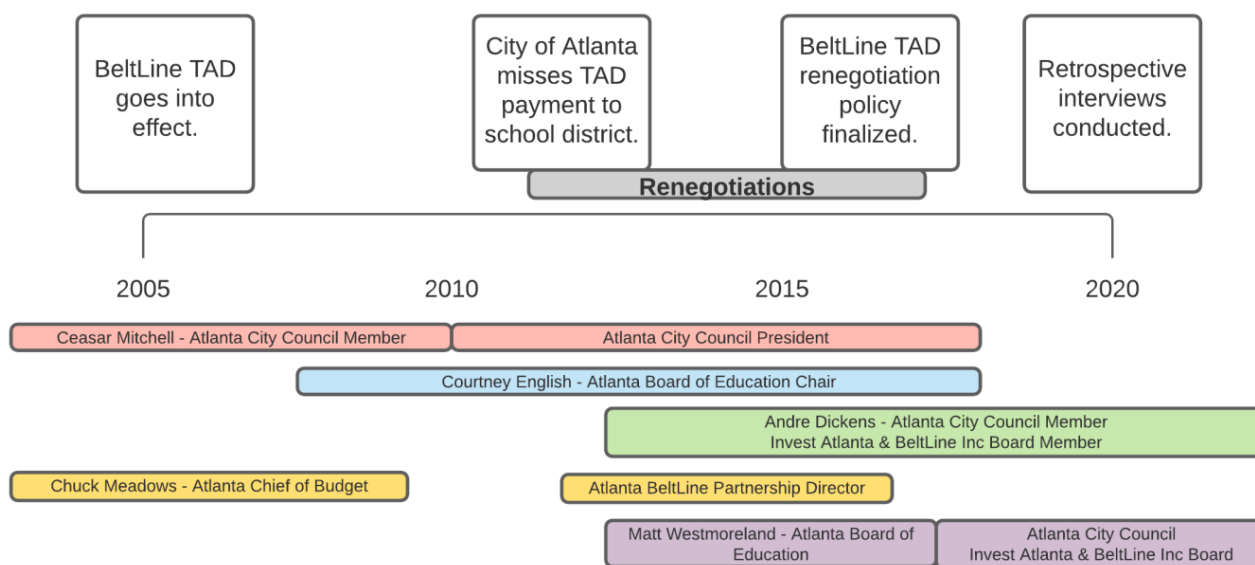
**Policymaker Interviews.** My second data source was interviews with policymakers. The purpose of these interviews was to understand the accounts of policy actors involved with the re-negotiation. I considered policymakers any person (elected officials, organizations directors, citizen-leaders) or organization (city, school, nonprofit organizations) engaged with the renegotiation process. The concept of policy actors came from Ball's (2012) description of entrepreneurs involved with publicly leveraging, promoting, and negotiating educational policies. I also used Brandt's (1998) definition of a policy sponsor as, "Any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, or model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy -- and gain advantage by it in some way" (p. 2). Importantly, Brandt continued to situate the relationship among sponsor/actor, "although the interests of the sponsor and the sponsored do not have to converge (and, in fact, may conflict), sponsors nevertheless set the terms for access" (p. 2). I conducted two interviews in person and three by phone. Interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes and followed the semi-structured interview protocol included in Appendix A. After obtaining consent, I audio-recorded each interview. Finally, I transcribed audio files and uploaded them as case files to NVivo.

**Identifying Participants.** After I identified all relevant news articles from January 1, 2013 to January 31, 2016, I searched each news article for policymakers and created individual case files using NVivo. I identified 18 people and four organizations. Using frequency counts, I invited the most mentioned policymakers to participate in an interview via e-mail. Of the 10 participants invited via e-mail, five agreed to an interview, and four were able to schedule an interview within the data collection timeframe. Additionally, one participant agreed to be interviewed (Chuck Meadows) after being recommended by participant Courtney English. The figure below

is a timeline representing how each participant was involved with the BeltLine TAD renegotiation.

**Figure 5**

*Timeline of Participants and the BeltLine TAD Renegotiation*



**Andre Dickens.** Dickens was elected to the Atlanta City Council in 2013, where he serves as a board member for Invest Atlanta, the City of Atlanta’s economic development authority. During renegotiations, he sat on the board of The Atlanta BeltLine, Inc., an agency created by Invest Atlanta that oversees the execution of the BeltLine TAD. These agencies are affiliated with the City of Atlanta but are considered stand-alone agencies best described as quasi-public structuring. Dickens became involved with the BeltLine TAD renegotiation in 2015 when he was one of two Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. board members to vote against their proposed 2016 budget because it did not include payments to Atlanta Public Schools towards the TAD debt.

Dickens is a native Atlantean and graduated from Atlanta Public Schools and Georgia Tech University.

**Chuck Meadows.** Meadows was involved with the original 2005 BeltLine TAD in his previous role of Chief of Budget and Fiscal Policy for the City of Atlanta. During the third renegotiation, he was the Executive Director of the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership. This nonprofit organization supports the Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. through raising private donations. Meadows now serves as the executive director of Atlanta Neighborhood Charter School, located two miles away from BeltLine's Southside Interim Trail in Grant Park. Meadows is a native Atlantean and graduated from Morehouse College and Harvard University.

**Cesar Mitchell.** Mitchell became involved with the original BeltLine TAD during 2003-2005 in his role as an Atlanta City Council Member. He recalled working with then-Mayor Shirley Franklin to gain community buy-in and introduced the legislation. During the dispute of TAD payments between 2013 and 2016, Mitchell served as the President of the Atlanta City Council. Mitchell left his City Council President post due to his mayoral bid in 2016. He works as an attorney at a local law firm. Mitchell is a native of Atlanta and graduated from Atlanta Public Schools, Morehouse College, and the University of Georgia. During our interview, Cesar shared that his wife is a teacher in Atlanta Public Schools, and he has two daughters who attend APS.

**Courtney English.** English served on the Atlanta Board of Education from 2011 to 2017. From 2014 – 2017, he served as the chair of the board and led negotiations for the Atlanta Board of Education with the City of Atlanta towards a new agreement after the city failed to make TAD payments in 2013. English left his Atlanta Board of Education post after his City Council bid in

2016. He now serves as the Director of Community Development for a local nonprofit focused on affordable housing and educational initiatives. He is a native of Atlanta and graduated from Atlanta Public Schools, Morehouse College, and Columbia University. He is a TFA alum.

***Matt Westmoreland.*** Westmoreland served on the Atlanta Board of Education from 2014 to 2017 and was the chair of the budget committee. Westmoreland was elected to the Atlanta City Council in 2017, where he serves as a board member for Invest Atlanta, the City of Atlanta’s economic development authority. He is a native of Atlanta and graduated from Atlanta Public Schools and Princeton University. He is a TFA alum.

**Demographic Data.** I used demographic data as a third data source to address research question number 3. To better understand the discourse used in the BeltLine TAD, I considered the renegotiation policy’s actual effects alongside the discourse analysis when possible. I compiled demographic and descriptive data for the schools within affected neighborhoods, student demographic information, enrollment information, performance data, opening and closing of schools within the area, and significant operational changes, such as management by a charter operator. I conducted searches using the State of Georgia’s Education Database (GADOE, 2020) to compare demographic information for the 14 schools on the BeltLine in 2012 and 2020.

### **Approach to Data Analysis**

My analysis drew on Fairclough’s approach to situate discourse within the context produced, understanding the two as interdependent. For Fairclough (2012), analysis follows three analytical considerations: 1. analysis of text, 2. analysis of discourse practices, and 3. analysis of social practices. Since critical theories assume non-neutrality and that all social production is inherently political, these perspectives also guided analysis. I carefully attended to the dialectical nature of discourse, focusing on how “discourse is related to other social elements” (Flowerdew

& Richardson, 2018, p. 13). My analysis centered around iterative readings of each case of data sources included. After considering each document in terms of the content, socio-political context, and rhetorical elements, I situated discourse within the theoretical frames guiding the inquiry. The table below provides a flowchart of these iterative readings and the focus of each phase.

**Table 1**

*Phases of Data Analysis*

<b>Phase/Iterative Reading</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Guiding Methods/Perspectives</b>
1. Content	Read for big ideas using concept coding (Saldana, 2014).	Focusing on what the discourse is constituting (as opposed to describing) (Bacchi, 2009)
2. Rhetorical Techniques	Read for rhetorical techniques, including metaphor, imagery, verbs, and rhetorical appeals (such as logos/reason, ethos/credibility, and pathos/emotion)	(Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012) (Richardson, 2007) (Wodak & Meyer, 2016)
3. Micro-Context	Read concerning micro-context, including other political events and local governmental structuring	Local histories involving race (White flight, gentrification, public housing, economic inequality)
4. Macro-context	Read concerning macro-context using the theoretical perspectives outlined	Whiteness Studies

***Phase 1: Qualitative Content Analysis***

I read through the news articles chronologically based on the publication while applying content codes to understand explicit content communicated through the texts, focusing on what the discourse was constituting instead of describing (Bacchi, 2009). CDS approaches text through multiple perspectives, including content (Fairclough, 2013b; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). The initial codes (Richardson, 2006; Saldaña, 2015) I used included concepts, such as “description of TAD,” “redevelopment,” and “litigation.” Initially, some of these content descriptors

were in vivo and drawn directly from the text when appropriate, including “good faith negotiations,” “impasse,” and “unsustainable.” I collapsed, renamed, or hierarchically linked codes among the other news articles throughout the initial content analysis process. For instance, I eventually linked the codes “good faith negotiations,” “dispute,” “work together,” and “waste of time” under a broader category entitled “attitudes about the negotiation.” This iterative process (reading articles chronologically, coding sections of text to describe the content, and collapsing, renaming, and linking codes) resulted in 5 content categories listed in the table below, along with offspring codes.

**Table 2**

*Content Categories & Offspring Codes*

	<b>Content Category</b>	<b>Offspring Codes</b>
Attitudes about Negotiation	Benefactors Cautiously optimistic Complex Dispute Divisive/Blame Good faith negotiations	Impasse/Standstill TAD unsustainable Waste of time Work together Hindered development
Revitalization	Affordable housing Development Dilapidated	Equity Gentrification Race
Framing Negotiation	APS compromise Nearing a deal Critique of APS Spectacle - Kasim as Bully Root Cause of Default - Recession as Natural Disaster	Impact - Impact on school district - Impact on BeltLine - Legal Action
Pro BeltLine	Greenspace Transportation BeltLine = Prosperity	
Public Involvement	Protest Public engagement & opinion	Public vs. Private Quasi-Public structuring

### *Phase 2: Textual Analysis & Rhetorical Techniques*

Next, I chose key segments of the text for textual analysis based on the research questions. Table 3 outlines which text segments I chose for text analysis.

**Table 3**

#### *Text Segments for Text Analysis*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Segment of Text</b>
1. What does discourse about the BeltLine TAD renegotiation reveal about social practices around policy impacting education?	Attitudes about negotiation Description of BeltLine Description of TAD
2. What do retrospective accounts of policymakers centrally involved reveal about convergences, divergences, and tensions during the BeltLine TAD renegotiation?	Negotiation Dispute
3. How do discursive representations of the BeltLine TAD renegotiation align with actual effects of adjacent communities?	Gentrification Displacement

During this phase, I read for rhetorical elements, grammar, and rhetorical appeals (Fairclough, 1989, 2013b; Reisigl & Wodak, 2000; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Table 4 outlines the forms of textual analysis considered within each element.

**Table 4**

#### *Elements of Textual Analysis*

<b>Rhetorical Elements</b>	<b>Grammar</b>	<b>Rhetorical Appeals</b>
Metaphor	Transitivity	Logos/reason
Imagery	Modality	Ethos/credibility
Binaries	Pronouns	Pathos/emotion
Vocabulary	Verbs	
Hyperbole	Nominalization	

Since the primary political discourse genre is practical argumentation (Fairclough and Fairclough 2018), I paid close attention to the claims and justifications. Practical argumentation focuses on what ought to be done and typically begins with a claim followed by justification. I paid careful attention to metaphor in crafting practical arguments because metaphor often links reason to a conclusion through implicit assumptions (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). Honing in on these metaphors provides insight into these assumptions and further advances how and why specific arguments take hold (Kitis & Milapides, 1997). Ng (2018) contended that studying metaphors as part of critical discourse studies “can help us discern dominant and structured ways with which people conceive of aspects of reality” (p. 215). Indeed, metaphors were very important since they can reveal underpinning ideology through analyzing relationships between source and target.

### ***Phase 3: Micro and Macro Context of Discourse***

The third element of Fairclough’s framework examines the social practices alongside discourse. At this point, I honed in on the socio-cultural practices surrounding each news article and interview and situated the text with the broader society and vice versa (Fairclough, 2013b; Richardson, 2006). First, I focused on contextual elements revealed in documents drawing from the theoretical underpinnings to describe the socio-political context. Then I read with a focus on micro-context that included other political events and local governmental structuring. The discourse’s micro-context included reading the text alongside local histories involving race (White flight, gentrification, public housing, economic inequality). During this phase, I drew on the theoretical frames and literature informing the study to situate how the discourse analyzed was produced.



### *Contextualizing Alongside Geographic & Demographic Data*

Finally, I analyzed resultant themes from discourse and interview data alongside demographic data. This step was important because of the tangible space encompassed within the BeltLine TAD and the numerous neighborhoods and school sites on this land. Hoglebe and Tate (2012) highlight that, “A geospatial view increases our understanding of education, health, and other social variables by framing research in the context of neighborhoods, communities, and regions” (p. 68). In this view, geographic and resultant demographic data contribute to the context, a vital lens for CDS. During this analytic phase, I looked for patterns that revealed convergences and divergences with the themes presented in original discourse to create a parallel story juxtaposed with predominant discourse. For instance, I examined the shifts in demographics for the 14 schools adjacent to the BeltLine, noting instances of increases or decreases in overall enrollment, free and reduced lunch rates, and race.

### **Delimitations**

Within this research, I establish several boundaries limiting the scope of analysis and interpretation. The critical approach I employed is inherently interpretive and bounded by my researcher positionality and the experiences, ideologies, biases, assumptions, and perspectives. Within discussion of the issues related to each data source included in the study, I paid careful attention to how each data source reifies existing power structures and limits fully understanding perspectives too often excluded.

### *News Articles*

I used mainstream news narratives about the BeltLine renegotiation. Like all texts, newspapers are inherently biased by the people and perspectives informing each article. According to Richardson (2007), individual producers of newspaper articles (journalists) impact the text

through their ideological positioning, while the genre mediates the production. Further, the ideological positioning of the consumer impacts how they decode the text. Richardson explained, “a reader of a newspaper may resist, subtly counter or directly misunderstand the encoded meaning” (p. 23). Journalists often consider their audience and craft articles accordingly. The pressure to engage and sustain customers is increasingly intense due to significant declines in subscriptions over the past decade. Financial pressures particularly impacted Black newspapers which served an essential purpose in “articulating the social and political aspirations of African Americans in their own words” (Pickett, 2012, p. 1). When using newspapers as a text for CDS, researchers emphasized the role of power and ideology undergirding the genre and shifted analysis away from using newspapers as sources of information but rather as indicators of inner-workings of the social processes related to policy in education (Cohen, 2010; Gabriel & Lester, 2013; Goldstein, 2011).

### *Interviews*

Since participants in this study were policymakers who hold varying degrees of political power. Qualitative research involving interviews requires disentangling researcher power on the responses shared by participants. While this is also true in this case, participants in this study also brought power to the research process. The scheduling and accessing participants clearly reflected the power issue. For three of the participants, I worked through assistants to schedule and communicate logistics, which Lancaster (2017) referred to as “gate-keeping” (p. 96). All participants except one needed to reschedule at least once before we were able to meet. Two policymakers who initially agreed to participate stopped responding after rescheduling a few times.

Secondly, I approached the interviewees with the sense that they were very busy, and this likely impacted how I asked the first few questions.

Despite the issues that arise with studying elites, there are advantages to this approach. Nader (1972) poses what she calls “Studying Up” and inquires what if we “were to study the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty?” (p. 5). Researchers in policy studies expanded this framework, specifically when interviewing policy elites (Aguilar & Schneider, 2016; Lancaster, 2017; Stich & Colyar, 2015 ). However, it is important to note that while all participants held a degree of political and social capital, this status does not extend to other forms of capital, including wealth and racial privilege for all participants. Four participants were Black elected or appointed officials during the renegotiation. My positionality as a White woman unquestionably impacted the interview and the perspectives participants shared with me and representing another boundary within this data source. Finally, while participants were experienced interviewees and well-versed in given statements about their organizations’ policies and current workings, interviews took place over three years after the BeltLine TAD renegotiations. All participants mentioned towards the beginning that they had difficulty remembering some details.

### ***Geographic & Demographic Data***

The goal of critical perspectives in geography is to complexify practices projecting a single narrative on a space. However, the power structures overseeing government databases bind the geographic and demographic data I collected. Government structures, such as those used to collect census data, do not always mitigate barriers to form completion, which may impact data analyzed. Due to the scope of this study, the demographic data I chose to use is supplemental to

news articles and interviews. Therefore, I did not contextualize demographic data to the extent Hoguebe and Tate (2012) argued for, including participant observation, interviews, and photographs. For instance, in addition to using maps alone, it is important to situate geographic data with interviews from residents to further contextualize how a place is described. Through additional data sources, such as photographs, critical geographers can better capture the essence of a space by highlighting areas representing the most meaning and illustrating how a space is used in everyday life beyond simply depicting where places are located.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Critical theories and methodologies examining discourse must contend with the impact of ideology on the entire research process by the researcher. The formulation of questions and the theoretical and methodological choices used to frame and carry out analysis are all entangled with researcher perspective. In my discussion of how I came to this work at the end of Chapter 1, I reviewed the most significant influences I bring to this work. While an initial disclaimer of identity is relevant, engaging in a reflexive process required attention and associated revelations through the analytic process.

This study included the analysis of documents and interviews using the critical theories guiding the study. Engaging with social theories requires interpretation, as researchers are simultaneously impacted by the ideologies also informing the analysis. Keeping this complexity in mind and participating in reflective processes such as composing memos, writing, and reading throughout the analysis process was crucial for me to position, to the extent possible, how my interaction mutually constructed, limited, and focused data interpretation.

Finally, it is essential to highlight the ethical issues surrounding a study that included discourse produced by policymakers and dominant media. This methodological choice excluded

counter-narratives and the lived perspectives of those affected to instead focus on the social practices around policies impacting education. The critical perspectives undergirding this study aim to situate inequitable social ordering at the center of the study. I avoided speaking for those experiencing inequity while speaking against inequitable power structures.

The methodological approach I crafted to problematize the policy issues at the center of the BeltLine TAD drew on tenets of critical discourse studies and critical policy studies. In outlining the details of this approach, I gave a rationale for the specific methodological choices and delineated the systematic steps employed with as much transparency as possible. Guided by critical theories and methodologies and their related epistemology, I did not seek to define, answer, or explain objectively but instead engaged in questioning to understand and describe changes in social practices around discourse framing neoliberal policies affecting education. In the following chapter, I discuss the research results emanating from this analytic approach. In illustrating each theme representing an element of discursive framing used to describe the BeltLine TAD renegotiation, I include excerpts of data analyzed, including media articles, interviews with five policymakers involved with renegotiations, and Georgia Department of Education (GADOE) demographic data from 2012 to 2020 representing changes to the 14 schools on the BeltLine.

## 4 RESULTS

Throughout the analytic process, I focused on discursive constructions that characterized the BeltLine TAD renegotiation in media articles and interview data. Using critical discourse studies and critical policy studies, I organized the findings from analyzed media articles and interview data by theme. Through this iterative process, I clustered themes around metaphors involving “odds,” including policymakers being “at odds” with each other, “stacking the odds,” “beating the odds,” “whose odds,” and “against the odds” (Table 5). I chose metaphors involving “odds” to capture the interplay of power-relations emanating from discourse about the BeltLine TAD renegotiation. According to its etymology, since the 1500s, the “odds” metaphor has captured the idea of “unequal things, matters, or conditions,” and is used in reference to “things that don’t come out even” (etymonline.com, 2021).

These themes show the discursive frames describing the renegotiation and addressed the research question: What does discourse about the Atlanta BeltLine TAD renegotiation reveal about social practices around policy impacting education? Across the first three themes, I primarily discussed media article discourse between 2013 and 2016. In so doing, I established the context undergirding retrospective accounts of policymakers centrally involved with the renegotiation. The last three themes address the convergences, divergences, and tensions described by the five policymakers I interviewed for the study (research question 2). Finally, I contextualized the results with demographic data from GADOE to consider the alignment between discourse and impacts on adjacent communities (research question 3). Table 5 outlines the six themes and sub-themes comprising the results.

**Table 5***Results Themes and Subthemes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
At Odds: Dramatic Spectacle While Calling for Compromise	War Bully vs. Everybody Compromise Now
Stacking the Odds: BeltLine = Prosperity	Natural Resources & Disasters Discursive Cleansing of the Land Quasi-Public Structuring as an Enigma
Beating the Odds: Trust Earned & Lost	Helping Students Distrust in Schools Good Faith Lost Faith
What are the Odds? Promises Unfulfilled	To Original Residents To Education To Affordability
Whose Odds? Benefactors, Politics, & the Public	Benefactors Politics The Public
Against the Odds: Hope in the Face of Defeat	The Power of Partnership Educational Impact Unwavering Support of TADs

**At Odds: Dramatic Spectacle While Calling for Compromise**

*Atlanta's top two officials are at very public odds this week, sparring in front of cameras and on radio over debt the city owes Atlanta Public Schools in connection with the Belt-Line.*

- Katie Leslie, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 2015

Media articles often framed the BeltLine renegotiation as a dramatic spectacle between two policy actors or between one policy actor and everyone else. During the three years that the BeltLine TAD was under renegotiation, media discourse focused on the dispute and positioned negotiating policymakers and entities as dueling and constantly at odds. This conflict-centered characterization contrasted with positively framed calls for compromise and finding “common ground” (Bloom & Leslie, 2014). Although many stakeholders and policy actors opined via the media about the BeltLine TAD, they also indicated that the direct negotiations were out of their

hands. According to one article, even elected officials were not central to renegotiating the Belt-Line TAD (Leslie & Bloom, 2014). Instead, participants explained that negotiations were conducted between the former mayor, Kasim Reed, and the former interim superintendent, Erroll Davis, who APS symbolically paid \$1 to lead the talks (Bloom, 2014a). The discursive distancing of other policy actors away from direct negotiations reified the dispute as a dramatic spectacle, relying on bully caricatures and a war-like metaphor that at times presented the dispute as entertainment. Leading with the dramatic elements of the dispute, media discourse presented the problem as interpersonal, based on personality clashes, while distancing policy details at the center of the conflict.

### *War*

Media articles frequently used a war or battle metaphor to describe the dispute between the City of Atlanta (COA) and Atlanta Public Schools (APS). According to Ng (2018), metaphor analysis can help us understand how concepts are understood. In the case of the BeltLine, the metaphor of war-like negotiations did not characterize divergent opinions on the use of the TAD as a funding strategy for development but rather positioned policymakers as a potential threat to the project. Through this framing, discourse positioned the Atlanta BeltLine and residents benefiting from the development as a casualty of the battle. This description criticized the policymakers' actions and might have put pressure on them to work together and come to a deal.

For instance, one 2015 article in the AJC described current negotiations by explaining that, "The talks seemed at a standstill for much of the year as Reed and former APS Superintendent Erroll Davis, who is advising the board on the issue, warred over negotiations" (Bloom, 2015). As evidenced in this excerpt, the war/battle metaphor created characters, two leaders,



pitting them against each other. Other articles dramatized negotiations with descriptions such as: “Battle mode”(Leslie, 2014c), “swap threats”(Leslie, 2014a), “trade jabs”(Blau, 2014), “spar-ring” (Leslie, 2015c), and “warred”(Leslie & Bloom, 2014). These descriptors evoked negative connotations about the policymakers leading the dispute, rather than focusing on issues with the policy. In effect, these portrayals cast blame on the leaders rather than on the TAD components that resulted in unsustainability, such as inaccurate revenue projections provided by a public finance consulting firm ([www.municap.com](http://www.municap.com)), despite warnings from local economists (Pendered, 2016a) that revenue projections were untenable.

Policymakers, particularly Reed, also used metaphors indicative of a war or battle, further framing the renegotiation as a fight to win. The war metaphor was displayed in a 2016 AJC article responding to reports of potential litigation from the school system. Reed responded, “Nobody’s going to negotiate at the end of a gun. So, if you’re going to take hostages, you’d better be ready to shoot the hostages” (Leslie & Bloom, 2016). The war metaphor was so prevalent that Bert Roughton, in an op-ed about the renegotiation, highlighted the hyperbole, stating, “Folks, this is a school system arguing with City Hall, not Russia invading Ukraine” (Roughton, 2014).

In all, media depicted the dispute as a dramatic spectacle by using caricature, metaphor, and dramatic description, shifted the emphasis away from the TAD itself and towards the issue of how political leaders should conduct themselves. Although the war-like instances cited in the media served as entertainment, they also served as a critique. As mentioned later in the same article quoting Reed about negotiating at the end of a gun, the AJC quoted a former school board member who said, “This divisiveness doesn’t help anybody” (Leslie, 2014). In addition to presenting a negative portrayal in contrast to positive ideas of working together, this discursive

ordering moved the discussion away from policy details. Instead, it portrayed the renegotiation as an entertaining dispute between two lone actors using attention-grabbing language that undermined their credibility in representing the public's interests.

### ***Bully vs. Everybody***

Another iteration of dramatic spectacle also featured former mayor Kasim Reed. The media positioned Reed as a bully in articles written about the dispute. Even though he was not the mayor that negotiated the original TAD, he led discussions on behalf of the BeltLine during the renegotiation. The media often criticized his leadership style and reported in ways that highlighted a lack of compromise. Tensions ran so high between Reed and local reporters that a 2014 AJC article described journalists being blocked from Reed's Twitter if they disagreed with his policies (Leslie, 2014d).

The bully characterization often described Reed's role in negotiations with other policymakers: those from the school district and members of the city council. For instance, an AJC article published towards the end of the dispute said,

The conflict has led to very public spats between Reed and a host of other officials, including former APS board chair Courtney English, APS Superintendent Meria Carstarphen, former APS Superintendent Erroll Davis, and even Atlanta City Council President Ceasar Mitchell. (Leslie & Bloom 2016)

The noun "spats" dramatized the interactions and positioned the mayor as the initiator of disagreements with policymakers.

Reed was also explicitly described as a bully by Mitchell (Blau, 2015b), a label reinforced by AJC reporters describing him as "angry" (Leslie, 2014d) and saying he "lashed out"

(Leslie, 2015c) against other policy actors, including Carstarphen and Mitchell. This representation of the mayor also played out discursively in his quotes published in media articles. In one instance, the AJC quoted Reed as saying that Carstarphen “doesn’t know what she’s talking about” (Leslie, 2015b) when asked about her requests for property deeds for APS buildings the board wanted to sell. The city held school district deeds due to a long-standing arrangement. He went on to describe her actions as “an unfortunate political stunt” (Leslie, 2015b). These statements from Reed about the superintendent reified the bully narrative, especially in terms of the mayor's role in negotiating with the school district about the TAD.

Media discourse continued to underscore the bully trope by noting contrasts to this behavior, in one example, saying the mayor "struck a rare tranquil tone" (Leslie, 2015a) and in another explaining that Reed and English were "seen having a cordial conversation" (Saporta, 2016). The characterization of the mayor's "bully tactics," as described by APS employees quoted in *Creative Loafing* (Blau, 2015a), functioned to undermine both the dispute over the TAD and his ability to lead the city in negotiations effectively.

### ***Compromise Now***

*No world-class city can have a true renaissance without healthy public schools. It is beyond ridiculous to have a city government at odds with its public school system. The two entities should be partners – working hand-in-hand to make both the city and its schools better for all.*

Maria Saporta, *Saporta Report*, 2015

In contrast to the dramatized spectacle of policymakers at odds, many articles emphasized the need for collaboration, compromise, and working together for the common good. Calls to collaborate were made directly and through metaphors describing the relationships between the negotiating parties. Media discourse used the practical argument that working together is the

ultimate goal, so a compromise should be struck. Calls for compromise or finding common ground were frequently predicated by assumed shared interest that both entities benefited from a renegotiated TAD.

In one example, an excerpt from a 2016 article said, “If we can get the City, the BeltLine, and APS all working in concert to promote quality development in marginal Atlanta neighborhoods, an economic renaissance could be in our future” (Saporta, 2016, February 1). In this quote, the metaphor of “in concert” described the school system, the city government, and the BeltLine development agency coming together. The metaphor analogized a concert, a lovely, harmonious event, to the BeltLine development and indicated it could result in an economic renaissance. The deficit-laden adjective “marginal” describing neighborhoods along the BeltLine discursively distanced and excluded community members. The juxtaposition of the coming together metaphor while simultaneously excluding the collaboration of the stated benefactors revealed that outside agencies held the power in developing the communities.

Discourse about collaboration, compromise, and unity were contrasted with the dramatized portrayals of feuding policy actors at an “impasse” (Blau, 2015b; Saporta, 2015), the dispute “dragging on” (Saporta & Williams, 2016). Calls for compromise suggested it was the ultimate goal, regardless of policy details. For example, Mitchell, one of Reed's harshest critics, called for bringing people together to stop the negatively conceived negotiations. The AJC reported that,

Council President Ceasar Mitchell has positioned himself as a peacemaker between the warring entities. Mitchell said Tuesday that the focus of Tuesday's meeting was to better understand the problem and current negotiations, not to do Reed's and Davis' jobs.

However, Mitchell said the group could tell Reed its suggestions and strategies for a resolution. "This is about bringing (people) together and closing ranks on an issue that appears to be tearing us apart," he said. (Bloom & Leslie, 2014)

Labeling Mitchell as a peacemaker further cemented the war metaphor used to describe the negotiations as stalled by actors at odds with one another. This quote cited Mitchell with bringing peace through scheduling a meeting to draw up suggestions for a solution. The focus on bringing people together indicated that this act alone would result in an agreement. Another instance illustrated the importance of collaboration quoted APS board member Cynthia Briscoe Brown saying,

Obviously nobody has the power to make the mayor do anything... But I hope that if the mayor sees that there is a spirit of collaboration and a spirit of forward progress among the rest of the stakeholders that he will be willing to join in that spirit and get this resolved. (Bloom & Leslie, 2014)

In this instance, Briscoe Brown indicated that the desired spirit focused on moving forward and resolution. Like most other instances calling for working together, there is no mention of policy issues.

The discursive privileging of compromise gives insight into how social policies are negotiated, justified, and rationalized. The theme of collaboration throughout articles analyzed indicated that people coming together and working well together were of primary importance, perhaps more so than the details of the policy's intended and unintended consequences.

### **Stacking the Odds: BeltLine = Prosperity**

*After the deal ends, Atlanta Public Schools, the city of Atlanta and Fulton County expect a windfall in tax revenue from development and rising property values.*

- Katie Leslie & Mark Niese, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 2013

While the dispute between the city and the school district over the unpaid repayments to APS continued for three years, both sides frequently invoked the importance of the BeltLine to Atlanta in providing economic prosperity. Media discourse described the BeltLine as vital for economic prosperity. Further, discourse positioned negotiations as a threat to this economic growth, as seen in the metaphor connoting dark, ominous times, "the dispute that clouded the BeltLine's financial future" (Bloom and Leslie 2016). The TAD represented stacking the city's odds towards increased prosperity due to the perceived economic opportunities related to the BeltLine. According to discourse, all stakeholders should be invested in the continued growth of the BeltLine. One AJC article quoted Reed saying, "The children of the Atlanta Public School System will prosper, Fulton County will prosper and the city of Atlanta will prosper" (Leslie and Bloom 2016). In effect, Reed concluded that because of the potential positive outcomes for APS, everyone should invest in the BeltLine. This argument is one of the few that directly cited APS as a benefactor of the TAD.

Policymakers on all sides of the deal used language equating the TAD with continued prosperity, including referring to the TAD as tapping into naturally existing resources and describing the recession as a natural disaster impacting the TAD while describing the BeltLine as cleansing the land.

### *Tapping into “Natural” Resources*

Discourse revealed the utmost importance of the BeltLine framing renegotiation to save the development, using words and phrases including “popular”(Leslie & Niese, 2013), “vital” (Donnelly, 2014), and “transformation of our city”(Westmoreland, 2016). While the theme of prosperity privileged economics over social issues, like education, discourse circumvented this dilemma by leaning into the BeltLine as a tool to excavate naturally occurring resources that would, in turn, benefit the schools. For example, a 2014 AJC opinion article alluded to the Belt-Line as uncovering a naturally occurring resource.

In 2005, it may have seemed perfectly reasonable to assume that the development along the BeltLine would generate barrels of fresh property taxes. In those days supporters believed the BeltLine would create 30,000 jobs and spur housing for 50,000 new Atlanta residents by 2030. Eager to tap the inevitable property tax gush, proponents convinced the school board to forgo its share in exchange for cash. They assumed the details would be sorted out later. (Roughton, 2014)

This excerpt described how the 2008 economic recession thwarted the development's planned trajectory, by referring to the pre-recession climate in 2005. The BeltLine would generate “barrels of fresh property taxes.” The imagery created by the word barrels evoked rich natural resources, such as oil. Such imagery constructed the BeltLine as an entity that could tap into existing resources for financial gain, further strengthened by the phrase “property tax gush.” As described in the article, a gush of property taxes was so enticing that the policy details and feasibility of this seemingly lucrative arrangement were less critical.

In another instance, The *Atlanta Business Chronicle* described the TAD as, “Unlocking economic growth: Atlanta's BeltLine, corridors and public spaces are key” (Saporta, 2016). This headline indicated that economic growth must be unlocked, conveying the implicit assumption that economic prosperity was restricted by *not* intentionally creating opportunities for outside developers and residents to come in. Articles frequently described the BeltLine as a tool that could access preexisting, naturally occurring resources. The discursive framing of the BeltLine as tapping into natural resources was extended to explain the cause of economic woes for the TAD, the 2008 recession, as a natural disaster.

### ***Recession as Natural Disaster***

Similar to the unanimous agreement that the BeltLine TAD results in economic prosperity for all, there was unanimous agreement that the original projections in 2005 were untenable. Media articles and participants pointed to the 2008 economic recession as the cause of the BeltLine not fulfilling their agreed-upon repayment commitments to the Atlanta Public Schools. Media articles discursively positioned the recession as a neutral event, a sort of natural disaster that happened to the BeltLine and the city, unrelated to human involvement. Describing the recession as a natural disaster shifted the TAD's shortcomings away from the policy and instead blamed an "unforeseen" event. For example, one *Creative Loafing* article used the passive tense to describe the recession as something that happened *to* the city rather than happened *because of* existing policies.

But then the Great Recession happened. Reed thinks the deal needs to be renegotiated, given the current economic climate. Like the mayor, many BeltLine supporters are quick to point out that the project was cold-cocked by the economic downturn and a lengthy



lawsuit that put the TAD, its main funding source at the time, in jeopardy. (Davis, 2014, July 16)

In addition to the passive phrasing of the recession as something that happened without human intervention, this article described the recession as causing an economic downturn that "cold-cocked" (Davis, 2014) the BeltLine project. A natural disaster metaphor was common throughout the articles written about the renegotiation. For example, articles used weather terms to describe the recession, such as "the Great Recession dampened real estate values" (Saporta & Williams, 2016), "the contract the two entities signed did not provide a release valve in the event of an economic catastrophe" (Pendered, 2016a) and "the project began just before the recession took hold, chilling development and cutting property values" (Niesse & Leslie, 2014). In these three instances, terms used to describe weather seemed to construct economic conditions as naturally occurring.

In making clear the source of the economic woes, one article explained that "The BeltLine's revenue projections were decimated by the recession, and now it's unable to meet the terms of its deal" (Leslie, 2014b). Language such as "decimated" and "recover" harkened to natural disasters and distanced policymakers from the recession. In contrast to positioning the recession as happening to the city, policymakers characterized themselves as solving the problem through renegotiation. In one AJC article, Reed said that the renegotiated deal "will allow the Atlanta BeltLine to recover from the worst recession in 80 years. And then, when the BeltLine is strong and able again, it can make payments at a higher level" (Bloom, 2016). The description of the BeltLine as needing to recover and strengthen after the event further neutralized the recession.

In contrast to the dominant metaphor stripping agency from the TAD policy in favor of pointing to an "unforeseen" recession, one article in the *Atlanta Business Chronicle* highlights GSU researchers referring to TADs as a "gamble." The article goes on to quote the researchers explaining that TADs are "risky investment tools, may create equity concerns, and may become costly to taxpayers if the new development prompted by a TAD does not produce the anticipated tax growth" (Pendered, 2016a). Notably, this mention was the only such occurrence across the 64 articles included in the study.

It is evident in texts analyzed that the school systems, the city, and the BeltLine experiences reduced revenue during the 2008 recession. Still, beyond the school system demanding the initial amount promised, discourse focused on moving forward without stalling the development of the BeltLine. Treatment of the recession as a neutral event obscured consideration of increasing economic inequity on future funding agreements. Discussion of future economic instability because of the BeltLine TAD was absent from articles.

### ***Discursive Cleansing of the Land***

Undergirding the imagery of the BeltLine tapping into natural resources and being thwarted by a naturally occurring event stood an assumption that the surrounding neighborhoods would be better if developed to yield higher property values. Media discourse did not directly address how development could impact existing residents and crafted the implicit assumption that more profitable neighborhoods would replace existing communities. For example, one AJC described TAD saying, "The idea is that after the BeltLine's 22-mile loop is complete by 2030, the payments will stop and APS will reap the rewards of better communities and higher property tax revenue" (Bloom, 2014b). This excerpt illustrated one economic argument used to justify the

TAD. This argument positioned the TAD as a desirable policy because of the stated positive effects of “better communities and higher property tax revenue.” While the latter was an explicit rationale directly rooted in economics, the former relied on a host of implicit assumptions about what a better community might entail. The idea that better communities were a reward that APS would reap alongside the mention of higher property tax revenue indicated that better communities are more than just increased economic prosperity. Further, the verb “reap” alluded to the metaphor, reap what you sow.

In another instance published in the *Atlanta Business Chronicle*, the implicit assumption was that developing the land would improve the communities.

A few years from now, the Westside Trail will connect 10 neighborhoods, four schools and four parks. It promises, as we've seen elsewhere around the BeltLine, to attract economic development to places like Murphy Crossing and the Kroger City Center. Above and beyond leveraging our investment with public-sector funds, we can look forward to attracting additional investment to these communities. (Cauley, 2014)

This article also referred to the BeltLine as a magnet and described the TAD as attracting development. While the quote concluded with investment, the discourse about improvements to the community did not directly address if or how the community's residents would benefit from development.

Media discourse about the need to cleanse the land discursively legitimized continued development, calling for resolution between the city and schools. For example, one AJC article said, “At stake is the future of Atlanta's internationally recognized green space project, which aims to turn a 22-mile loop of dilapidated rail lines into a necklace of parks, trails and transit”

(Leslie, 2014a). This discursive ordering positively presented the outcome of increased economics while avoiding the consequences of residents' potential displacement. Absent from discourse were perspectives from existing community members about the development and what it potentially meant for them and their neighbors. Lack of discussion about democratic participation in media discourse was strengthened by descriptions of the TAD itself as an enigma.

### *Quasi-Public Structuring as an Enigma*

Throughout discourse describing the renegotiation, description of TAD structuring was often absent. Media discourse positioned the quasi-public organization executing and funding the BeltLine TAD objectively. However, when parsing out the details, discourse highlighted the opaque nature of the financing. For instance, one *Atlanta Business Chronicle* article described the TAD structure by explaining that “The financing of the Atlanta BeltLine is an enigma” and “complex” (Pendered, 2016b). The description of the financing as an enigma hinted that the quasi-public structuring that finances and carries out the project was complicated and unclear.

Quasi-public structuring allowed for increased autonomy in carrying out the goals of the city government. In this arrangement, mayoral appointments including elected officials and businesses leaders sat on the board, distancing public input and oversight. The case of the Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. was even more unique because a quasi-public entity created it. According to its revised by-laws in 2012 posted on their website, ABI served “as the implementation agent for the BeltLine TAD and for the City of Atlanta to carry out the administrative, development activities with respect to the herein described BeltLine TAD” (<https://beltline.org>).

During negotiations, Reed leveraged this technicality and claimed the City of Atlanta (COA) was not responsible for contracts signed by the Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. (ABI) even though

the COA created and oversaw ABI. At the core of the COA's argument against making the full payments outlined by the 2005 TAD was a question of responsibility. COA argued that they were not responsible for the payments since ABI runs the TAD, despite being a signatory on the original contract. This argument helped stack the odds in favor of the BeltLine by complicating who was responsible for previously signed contracts. Discursive distancing was achieved not only in official policy documents that created a separate agency with authority to execute the TAD but also in everyday discourse about the topic. While the official discourse via policy documents set in motion an arrangement intended to "alleviate the burdens on and otherwise serve to advance the purposes of a governmental or public nonprofit corporation," casual discourse distancing and omitting public oversight from this arrangement engrained its existence as normative.

### **Beating the Odds: Trust Earned & Lost**

*An unfortunate signal has been sent to taxpayers that the persons entrusted with the power to right track this issue lack either the motivation or the intent to find common ground. Even more grave, supporters of the BeltLine have been pitted against supporters of our schools, and parents like myself who believe in the promise of the BeltLine have been put in the untenable position of being forced to choose.*

- Caesar Mitchell, *Atlanta Business Chronicle*, 2015

A theme running through much of the discourse about the BeltLine TAD involved trust or lack thereof. At times, negotiations represented beating the odds since opposing entities overcame mistrust between the COA and APS. For example, school leaders garnered trust by appealing to pathos and logos with arguments about the importance of education. The term "good faith" highlighted the fragility of trust between negotiating entities. Policymakers discussed good faith to characterize their actions or criticize others' actions, especially in helping students and

education. However, the city's persisting issues of balancing social versus economic progress troubled the notion that the BeltLine TAD could beat the odds.

***“Helping Kids” & The Negotiating Power of Education***

The media articles also addressed education and children since the school district was a primary TAD funding source. Almost all articles describing the TAD explained that it was financed by diverting a portion of the school system's property tax revenue. Such as,

At issue is a 2009 agreement in which the city receives a portion of the school district's property tax revenue to pay for the BeltLine's network of parks and trails. In exchange, it agreed to make \$162 million in a series of fixed annual payments from the BeltLine tax allocation district, or TAD, to APS. (Leslie and Bloom 2016)

This explanation or a similar explanation was offered up over 20 times across the articles written about the BeltLine negotiation. This explanation functioned to offer background knowledge about how the BeltLine TAD is connected to the school district but failed to contextualize how this arrangement impacts children attending APS as related to the diverted revenue.

While almost all stakeholders mentioned APS's children as benefactors of the BeltLine TAD directly or indirectly, the sense of urgency varied based on the vantage point. APS officials called for payment due to an immediate need for assistance. In one statement given to the *Atlanta Business Chronicle*, then superintendent Meria Carstarphen used the analogy of a short runway (Saporta, 2015, October 12) to illustrate the urgency of when resources were necessary. She explained, “The problems are so entrenched and the runway is so short, we will have to consider bold actions so we can get relief from long-standing failures.”

Even though the city maintained that they could not make payments to the school district, city officials also said their position was best for students. At one point, city officials claimed that school leaders were neglecting the city's children's needs by threatening to take legal action if APS did not receive payments.

“For him to be taking such an aggressive position is disappointing, and it's going to be met with similar aggression,” Reed said. “....But I'm not going to have my love of children questioned or my commitment to children questioned.” (Leslie, 2014e)

Reed never discussed how the policy would impact children, and instead attempted an appeal to ethos, referencing his unquestionable commitment to children, to garner support.

The discourse used to describe the renegotiation often failed to include discussion of the impact on students attending APS who did not receive agreed-upon payments. One rare instance directly addressing the effects of a missed payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT) was a February 2014 headline that described the missed payments as “Equivalent of more than 80 teachers pay and benefits” (Niese and Leslie 2014). The impact increased with each passing year until payment and subsequently renegotiated TAD was reached in 2016. When policymakers quoted in AJC articles discussed students, they leveraged a discourse of “helping kids” to garner trust in their point of view.

In the few instances where news discourse described public opinion on the issue, the theme of helping kids was paramount. For example, in the one media article covering protest staged by APS workers, one protester interviewed explained that “This rally is about what is best for our kids” (Blau, 2015a). Further, protesters quoted in the article characterized Reed's

negotiations on behalf of the city as threatening to “hurt our children's future” through his “tactics that attempt to belittle Dr. Carstarphen, parents, and APS employees.”

### ***Good Faith***

The term “good faith” was frequently leveraged by policymakers to characterize their actions or criticize others for lack thereof. The concept of good faith responded to public pressure to build trust in negotiating a deal. Policymakers on all sides of the negotiation called for good faith negotiations; however, COA and BeltLine officials most frequently used this term. For instance, then Invest Atlanta CEO Brian McGowan told AJC reporters that, “All parties continue to negotiate in good faith. We will work together to find a resolution that is beneficial for all sides” (Niese and Leslie 2014). Two years later, the city made a partial payment of \$4 million to APS and labeled that payment as evidence of good faith. However, other reporting stated that this payment avoided a contractual measure that would have harmed the BeltLine. AJC reporter Leslie Katie (2016) wrote,

If it hadn't paid, it would have exceeded a \$15 million debt threshold and been in default of the contract, a move that would have had financial ramifications for the BeltLine's ability to expand. Reed has previously said the city has four years to resolve such a default. But earlier this week, he told council members that making the \$9.1 million payment was critical to avoiding it.

Further complicating good faith was criticism from some Atlanta City Council members about the payment amount in question. The previous summer, the Council approved a \$4 million good faith payment. However, the actual payment was \$9.1 million. The mayor included the additional \$5.1 million to avoid surpassing the debt threshold outlined by the contract. When the



Council President and a few other council members disputed this payment, the mayor reminded that according to the TAD, and COA's status as a signatory in the deal allowed him to authorize the payment without the Council's approval. This mini-dispute and its discursive portrayal in media articles reiterated the dramatic spectacle and bully narrative. Even when the Council attempted to show good faith by authorizing a payment, it resulted in a controversy when the amount was over double what was approved.

Direct mention of good faith attempts at negotiation was absent from school officials' discourse; however, a few board members gave statements indirectly acknowledging and calling for such good faith measures. The AJC quoted APS's Board Chair as wanting to be "good partners" with the city.

We are looking for a resolution to this. Insofar as if it's the Council or the mayor's office, we want to work with our partners at the City... to find a resolution," English said. "We want to be good partners with the city of Atlanta. We want to be good partners with the BeltLine. (Leslie, 2014b)

A current of distrust frequently contrasted with the theme of good faith. For instance, descriptions of good faith efforts were quickly followed by a qualifying statement about remaining "cautiously optimistic." For example, Mayor Reed's communications director Anne Torres used this qualifier when defending the mayor's decision to issue the \$9 million payment to APS without full council approval, saying, "We remain cautiously optimistic that settlement will be reached soon" (Saporta, 2016, January 10).

### *Distrust in Schools*

Alongside calls for good faith negotiations, media discourse conveyed distrust in the school district and discursively undermined APS' credibility as a negotiating tactic. For example, one AJC article quoted a city attorney saying, "A lawsuit... would divert the system's attention away from fixing its low graduation rates, budget woes, underfunded pension and reputation as more than a dozen former district employees now face trial in connection with test cheating" (Leslie, 2014a).

Further, city representatives frequently questioned the school district's efficacy, intimating that the district's shortcomings should determine whether or not to uphold the contract as written. Undermining the district's credibility was a strategy to deflect the negative impact of missed payments from the BeltLine. For instance, Reed explained on a radio show speaking to host Ryan Cameron saying,

And nobody is having a conversation about the fact that APS's pension is only 18% funded, Ryan. It is only 18% funded. So, if folks really want to have a conversation about saving the APS school system and children, then you have to talk about a pension system that is moving towards insolvency. Third, the other point that I've made is when the APS school system was on the verge of losing its accreditation, I was the person who was leading that effort. (V-103, 2015)

Spokesperson Torres reiterated this point to the AJC, saying "the city's counterargument that school leaders have failed to address serious financial headwinds, including a \$550 million unfunded pension liability" (Leslie & Bloom, 2014).

At one point, the AJC said that the BeltLine is "the most popular public project in the entire city of Atlanta - by a lot - more popular than the Atlanta Public Schools" (Davis, 2014). Critique of the school district was not unique to COA policymakers. One AJC article noted that the district was "eager to regain its prominence following the test cheating scandal" (Leslie, 2014). These critiques cast doubt on the school district's credibility, even though they did not pertain to the TAD. The practical argument crafted by mentioning APS's issues was that since APS has difficulty managing the district, they should accept a lesser payment than initially agreed upon. The tactic of undermining the district's credibility contrasts with discourse calling for good faith negotiations.

### ***Lost Faith***

In addition to increased tensions with the school district, the BeltLine TAD revived long-standing tensions between original community members and developers entrusted to ensure their interests. While discourse about the negotiations did not frequently mention community members, discourse often focused on a lack of trust.

Revealing an absence of good faith negotiations, one of the few interviews with a local leader representing a neighborhood impacted by the BeltLine's development highlighted the tension between residents and city officials and developers involved with projects impacting their neighborhoods. In this instance, Nia Knowles, who served as the West End's neighborhood planning unit (NPU) president, experienced tension when discussing the BeltLine project with her neighbors. While Knowles was a supporter of the project, she explained that many were not, stating, "Those who say they aren't going to use (the BeltLine) are many of the people who have been here a long time and heard change is coming ... but still see the crime and stink of

foreclosure and kind of lost faith" (Leslie & Trubey, 2014). In the article, AJC reporters referred to the "decades of promises of redevelopment that never materialized" as the source of lost faith. Another quote from Knowles within the same article revealed that she was worried about being priced out of the neighborhood resulting from increased investment due to the BeltLine TAD, explaining "I do have to worry about (affordability)," she said. "...I may be out-priced in an area that I helped to build" (Leslie & Trubey, 2014).

Finally, mostly absent from the discourse were direct considerations of the impact of long-standing mistrust among stakeholders most impacted by development in their neighborhoods. Discussions in mainstream media excluded perspectives from long-standing residents of Atlanta's predominately Black communities despite being the stated benefactors of development. It is important to consider resident distrust of the BeltLine TAD alongside the history of developers and city officials' failed promises in previous development projects (Keating, 2001).

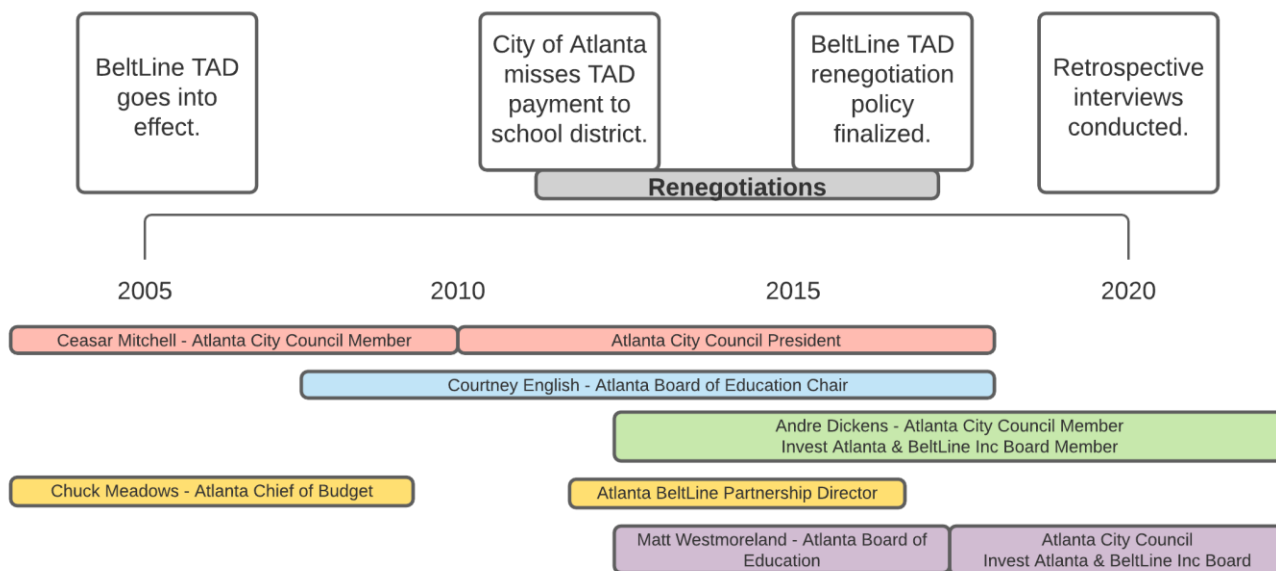
### **Summary of Media Discourse Findings**

The first themes represent findings addressing the question: What does discourse about the Atlanta BeltLine TAD renegotiation reveal about social practices around policy impacting education? Overall, media discourse about the BeltLine TAD renegotiation during the 3-year long dispute used dramatic spectacle (at odds), highlighted the need for economic growth (stacking the odds), and contrasted good faith efforts to help with themes of distrust (beating the odds). Taken together, these discursive framings positioned policymakers as threats to both the BeltLine and APS while maintaining unanimous support for the BeltLine. Media discourse necessitated a project such as the BeltLine in Atlanta because of the economic growth it offered. This framing deemphasized debate over TADs as a funding strategy and instead called for

compromise between public entities to continue development. Next, I considered discursive framing of the renegotiation in media articles with retrospective accounts of policymakers (research question 2) and contextualizing demographic data collected from the Georgia Department of Education (GDOE) (research question 3). The following three themes represent convergences, divergences, and tensions between media discourse and that of the five policymakers interviewed (Figures 5) and evidence of actual outcomes gleaned from demographic changes across BeltLine neighborhood schools.

### Figure 5

#### *Timeline of Participants' Involvement with the BeltLine*



### **What are the Odds? Promises Unfulfilled**

*If the things that are built have some value to the existing current residents, then it is a benefit. If it's just breweries, yoga studios, a dog park, that doesn't necessarily look like what the current residents have been asking for decades.*

Andre Dickens, Personal Interview, 2020

Promises kept and broken were a central theme in discourse about the Atlanta BeltLine in media articles and participant interviews. One prominent symbol of broken promises associated with the development was the resignation of Ryan Gravel, whose master's thesis inspired the original project. Gravel resigned from the Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. board in 2016, explaining that the project's execution no longer aligned with his original intent. The odds that the promises made to community members would come to fruition were questioned from the start, especially considering that many of the BeltLine TAD assurances were reminiscent of previously unmet agreements (Keating, 2001). Promises alongside previous city initiatives, such as the Georgia Dome project in 1992, were commonly made to original residents and the school district for increased affordability (Mitchell, personal interview, 2020). While stakeholders understood that the odds were promises might not be kept, they engaged with promise-making, nonetheless.

#### ***Promises to Original Residents***

According to participant and former Atlanta City Council President Ceasar Mitchell, promises surrounding the project go back to its inception. When discussing the dispute between 2013 and 2016, Mitchell referred to the original 2005 Community Benefits Agreement related to the BeltLine TAD as a propitious investment to the existing residents and the community. He discussed the work he did under the direction of then-mayor Shirley Franklin to establish trust and buy-in from citizens to create an agreement that reflected their interests. When

contemplating the outcomes of that deal almost 15 years later, Mitchell addressed these unfulfilled promises by saying,

Cesar Mitchell: The city still has not really reconciled what I consider to be its commitment to community benefits agreements. And certainly, we're behind the eight ball as relates to affordable housing and affordable housing around the BeltLine.

Even three years after Mitchell's work in resolving the dispute, he acknowledged that those core elements remained unaddressed despite significant time passing.

Perceived distrust among community members seemed to result from these unfulfilled promises. For Chuck Meadows, then-CEO of the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership (ABP), distrust complicated negotiations towards ensuring the BeltLine's future, the best prospect for economic growth in his view. He described the feelings related to unanswered promises and said,

Chuck Meadows: I can guess that there is a distrust that the funds that are generated will be used on projects that really do have a substance of economic benefit. Like a widespread or broad economic benefit. I hear folks say, well, you know you're giving this money to developers. So, I think that there is a distrust that the funds raised will actually have the type of public impact that I think you and I both want. I think that's definitely what your TAD proponents would argue that this is having widespread economic development, but I think there's a distrust in the community as to whether or not that actually ends up being the case.

The feeling of distrust Meadows described reflects both historical projects in Atlanta and the BeltLine project. However, Meadows highlighted the economic growth caused by the project, referring to development as "widespread" and "broad." Meadows used the pronoun "we" in saying, "I think we would argue that this is having widespread economic development," implying a collective agreement and cast doubt on the validity of any distrust.

The public dispute increased attention on promises made and the degree to which they were met. In discussing existing residents' perceptions of the TAD, Atlanta City Councilmember Andre Dickens said that,

Andre Dickens:       A public fight like that sometimes highlights the delays in projects. Unmet promises, unkept promises, and all these other things. Because people are looking at it like if you're busy doing what you should do, you wouldn't have time for this fight.

Dickens explained that residents became increasingly critical of policymakers' intentions regarding the public fight. Dickens was mainly concerned with the impact on senior citizens and the working class, whom he pointed out are "the people that helped Atlanta become what it is."

During retrospective interviews, participants referenced promises to original residents in different ways. For Meadows, promises to original residents were made with the understanding that some would leave as new residents came in, pushing up property tax rates and meeting the aims of the project. For Dickens, promises to original residents had to acknowledge the legacy of those with long-standing roles in their contributions to the community. While the 2005 community benefits agreement and the news discourse and policymaker statements during the dispute identified the original residents as the primary benefactors of the development, retrospective



interviews revealed gaps and shortcomings related to meeting these stated intentions. In addition to the community agreements, the BeltLine TAD made specific promises to the Atlanta Board of Education. This finding indicated that the benefactors stated in media discourse did not align with the BeltLine TAD renegotiation's actual benefactors.

### *Promises to Education*

In addition to promises made through community benefits agreements, the BeltLine TAD included payments in lieu of taxes (PILOTs) in exchange for 20 years of property tax revenue. However, the city failed to follow through, missing the first PILOT in 2013. These missed payments were at the root of the dispute, and the unmet promise of failed PILOT payments caused concern for the participants interviewed.

Harkening back to the distrust Meadows described, Mitchell viewed his role as City Council President to establish trust allowing the project to move forward and create a partnership between the school district and city. He said,

Cesar Mitchell: We had not fulfilled the promises to the school system for a long time. And it just started to not make sense that we hadn't.

It would serve as a symbol of the city's commitment to the school district and a willingness to work side by side

Mitchell explained that fulfilling this promise would do more than provide a financial contribution to the school district. While he did not directly mention other unmet promises, Mitchell's comment alluded to longer-term disinvestment of the city in saying "for a long time."

From the vantage point of a then APS' school board member, Matt Westmoreland said that "the potential of school tax dollars being used for economic development purposes." As the

chair of APS' budget committee during the time of the dispute, he explained the impact of missed PILOT payment on the school district:

Matt Westmoreland: But we were not in dire financial straits during those four years, because we'd come out of the recession, so it was kind of four years of growth and prosperity. So, our budgets were growing a lot, every year. And we were working really hard to spend the dollars effectively... I do not believe we had to make drastic financial decisions because we didn't have the money. It was more I signed a contract. We had a deal. You owe us money. It's not if you don't pay us, we're gonna have to furlough teachers.

In contrast, APS Board Chair English also grappled with the unmet promise for Atlanta's children. He said he “believed that money now was better than money later” regarding getting funds for APS students as soon as possible and not waiting for the halo effect. The halo effect refers to the theoretical property tax revenue increase schools and cities should receive after the 25-year TAD expires.

Courtney English: I did not want to wait on the halo effect to occur or not. What was true is that APS was forgoing future property tax dollars to fund the BeltLine. The kids deserved to receive return on invested. So, I wanted to guarantee that that happened, regardless of what happened on the BeltLine's side. I was singularly focused on making sure that the kids got revenue from the BeltLine. I use kids very intentionally because it's their money that we use to educate them.

This perspective is unique in the BeltLine TAD discourse, in that English focused on the short-term. Mitchell and Meadows pointed out that after 20 years, the school system would reap the benefits of a higher tax base. Despite his focus on getting money for students at the time of the dispute, English said he should have extended the promise to education:

Courtney English: Their parents need access to jobs to pay a living wage or skill training. They need access to affordable housing. Without all those things it makes it hard to educate them [students]. And so, I would have broadened my gaze and tried to find a way to leverage APS's strong bargaining position to make a lot of those things happen.

English pointed out that the contract's promise to APS was a strong bargaining position to broaden the impact on the families and residents surrounding local schools. His reflection spoke to more extensive promises made for affordability and ultimately to avoid displacement of long-term residents.

### *Promises for Affordability*

Despite the frequent mention of affordability during retrospective interviews, these concerns were mostly absent from media discourse about the policy during the renegotiation period. Later, when interviews were conducted, demographic data in the impacted neighborhoods made clear that gentrification and displacement resulted from the TAD. English reflected on the danger of displacement and highlighted the causes, saying,

Courtney English: I think the danger there, though, is, is displacement caused by gentrification that will naturally occur if there are no programs, policies, and procedures put in place to check: say affordable housing, transportation options, so on

and so forth. And so, I think that's, you know, that's a delicate balance that I think the city and the BeltLine folks have to figure out.

English described displacement as a natural outcome during the revitalization process if intentional interventions are not put into place. Referring to unaffordability as a natural occurrence discursively distanced policymakers from this outcome. Meadows echoed the issue of affordability in terms of home prices, conveying that the real-estate practices were necessary as part of the redevelopment process and now required more intentional efforts towards affordable housing.

Chuck Meadows: In the BeltLine TAD, there are these properties that are primed for redevelopment that the BeltLine Inc. sells over to developers with good proposals to redevelop those properties.

The increase in housing prices is being driven as the BeltLine is built out is driving folks out of neighborhoods. So, I think our approach to affordable housing needs to be much more aggressive than it has been.

Meadows described the properties as "primed" for redevelopment, harkening to theme of needing to revitalize the land. Meadows positioned "properties" as the subject of the sentence, detaching the actions of developers involved. Framing the developers' actions this way communicates that this process is intentional and expected to achieve redevelopment. For Meadows, market-rate developers should be tasked with creating affordable housing, and much more aggressively to meet demands.

In contrast, Dickens placed developers (they) as the sentence's subject when describing the effects of displacement on his constituents.

Andre Dickens: Well, people were feeling like they were getting displaced. We've been living in a city for 34 years, and now that the BeltLine is here, right behind me. I've been hearing about this thing coming and now it's gotten here. People are buying my neighbors' houses. They keep trying to buy my house. They buy my neighbor's house, and they build a McMansion over here, and then my property value goes up higher than I can even afford the taxes to compensate. So, displacement was happening due to these kind of efforts.

During his interview, he outlined the specific work he leads in the renegotiation's aftermath to assist long-term residents struggling to stay in their homes. He said,

When I start hearing that, and took my own trip and researched, I was seeing the price of these apartments. And then I'm seeing that people... nothing was there for the working class, the people that had helped Atlanta become what it is. That's why I want to make sure that we had a fair ecosystem.

The reality that Dickens described illustrated the concept of economic development as a "double-edged sword," a metaphor Westmoreland, Meadows, and Mitchell all used during interviews to describe the TAD's displacing effect. Meadows elaborated by explaining that while TADs generate revenue, the economic investment may not impact the current residents of neighborhoods affected by the TAD. Similarly, Mitchell said,

Ceasar Mitchell: So economic development is a double-edged sword. It really is. And what I mean by that is we mainly want to drive jobs, entrepreneurship, homeownership opportunities to a community. When you bring dollars to the community, you raise the overall value of a community being a city. And when you

raise the value, you raise prices. And when you raise prices, that puts pressure on folks who don't necessarily have the same access to resources. I mean you, low to moderate-income individuals. We're talking about senior citizens. We're talking about demographic groups that don't typically have as much net worth. Or disposable income, or just salary. As you know, the salary and wealth gap that exists as it relates to certain demographics: White, Black, Asian, women, men.

And the BeltLine is still moving forward. I'm sitting here looking out my window right now. I'm looking at Memorial Drive. Unbelievable. Looking at the BeltLine right around Ponce City Market. Unbelievable. Look at the neighborhood where I was born over by Edgewood and Whiteford Avenue, and Candler Park. Goodness, look at that. You got the BeltLine moving forward and development moving forward. But the question is do we have an affordable housing policy and an investment that is going to keep our communities stable from the standpoint of not just completely turning them over such that what our city looked like once before it can never look like again?

The double edge sword analogy described displacement as an undesirable but necessary effect of improving a community. Mitchell's detailed description of how the city has dramatically changed throughout his life painted a bittersweet picture of economic development. He described it as "unbelievable" and "moving forward." Simultaneously, he alluded to the reality that not everyone is moving forward with the development. Mitchell specified that those left behind are

people with a low to moderate-income and highlights the racial and gender wealth gap that further complexifies the divide.

Ultimately, the failed promise of affordability led to the displacement of long-term residents and increased gentrification (Immergluck & Balan, 2018). While participants all acknowledged the BeltLine TAD's pledges to residents and APS for affordability was important, they agreed that most of these promises fell short 15 years after the initial agreement. While they each were working to address these issues in varying capacities at the time of the interviews, results highlighted a tension around the extent that such promises are entirely possible. As a result, residents, schoolchildren, and communities continued to weigh the odds of the BeltLine TAD materializing.

### **Whose Odds? Benefactors, Politics, & the Public**

*We were spending money that we should not have been spending. We've made financial commitments to private sector companies that far exceed what the public knows. So, what I would call a level hypocrisy, I just did not want to be a party to that.*

- Ceasar Mitchell, Personal Interview, 2020

Amid the media spectacle of policymakers at odds, negotiating tactics, and promises made and broken was a fight over who would ultimately benefit from the BeltLine TAD. Politics impacted debate over whose odds were at stake during the negotiating process. Notably, while participants expressed concern over failed promises to original residents and a need to ameliorate this issue, discourse rarely discussed democratic participation.

### **Benefactors**

When it came to who benefited from the BeltLine TAD, media discourse essentially concluded that everyone benefited from the development. For example, the AJC quoted a former school board member, Katy Barksdale, saying, "Anyone who has been around Atlanta and even

naysayers of the BeltLine would say it's a good thing for the city" (Leslie, 2014e). One metaphor used to describe the continued belief in TADs, despite the problems outlined, was comparing the BeltLine to a win.

Courtney English: I think it is a win for... it's a win for our kids, and certainly a win for our employees. It was a win for APS's employees. It was a win for the city. And a win for the taxpayers.

While participants sometimes echoed this sentiment, when asked directly about the intended and actual benefactors, the issue of who the odds were in favor of became more complicated. For example,

Andre Dickens: When the TAD goes well, everybody benefits. The businesses in the area. They *should* all benefit. The homeowners *should* benefit. The residents *should* benefit by having additional amenities. The students *should* benefit because the area *should* have revitalization. And the city *should* benefit because of delay in taxes now still gives new taxes for the long hall.

While Dickens echoed the theme of everyone benefitting as seen in the media discourse, he repeated the qualifier "should" in his explanation. This indicated that the TAD could help everyone. However, it depends on the implementation, as participant Mitchell said.

Cesar Mitchell: I believe still that a tax allocation district, if done properly and if done with respect to the community and other considerations, can be an incredible economic development tool for communities that really are seeking to grow and thrive and really be reinvigorated.



Mitchell, Meadows, Westmoreland, and English all spoke about doing TADs properly. For Mitchell, proper implementation included drawing the TAD lines only around undeveloped areas and a robust community benefits agreement. For Meadows, PILOT payments were harmful to TADs, and instead he recommended including intentional development around schools impacted by the initial deal.

In all, participants agreed that a swift renegotiation of the TAD was necessary to benefit all city stakeholders. English contended that the TAD could benefit students and residents alike but cautioned that disputes over negotiations threatened these outcomes.

Courtney English: The BeltLine is a project that affects 22 different neighborhoods throughout the city. It's a project that impacts thousands of people, just like the school system. So, I certainly believe that our kids are, first and foremost, paramount. I believed that the BeltLine could actually be beneficial for our kids, from a revenue perspective, both long and short term. But that revenue cannot be realized if the city and APS were involved in protracted litigation.

In considering the thousands of people he saw as benefactors of the BeltLine project, English's discussion of potential litigation between APS and the COA pointed to politics' role in the three-year-long dispute, giving insight into how the negotiation process unfolded and therefore impacted the stated benefactors.

### *Politics*

Participants frequently pointed to the issue of politics and “conflicting personalities” as an explanation for the ongoing dispute. Blaming politics constituted the problem as conflicting

personalities rather than policy details. Meadows summed this up by saying, "That [the dispute] goes back to the individual political leaders involved and sort of personalities driving that conversation in a way that wasn't constructive, in my opinion." Elaborating on this experience, Mitchell remembered, "It was always some kind of, you know, let me go run behind the fence and throw rocks back at you." Mitchell's description repeated the battle metaphor prevalent in media articles and pointed towards a fraught political environment.

Mitchell described this political climate as the result of one politician with the power to stall or continue negotiations. Mitchell cast blame on Reed, who in his view, stymied the work he did with the council and in collaboration with the school board. Furthermore, he implored that opinion and punditry were not a part of the process.

Cesar Mitchell: It doesn't matter, except to the extent that the person who puts their hand on the red button is sensitive to public opinion. It doesn't matter what that public opinion is or what the punditry down at City Hall and legislation by policymakers like myself is. We can pass legislation. We can introduce and propose legislation, but if you can't get the council to pass it, that's one thing. And then if you get the council to pass it, you know, is it veto proven? And if it's veto proof, then how do you actually compel the person with the red button to act on it? So that's on both sides of the table.

Mitchell used a metaphor to describe the political process as distant from public advocacy and engagement, even though the policy impacted residents from multiple vantage points (education, housing affordability, demographics). Further, Mitchell's description highlighted the checks on Atlanta City Council's power, even further distancing citizens from authentic

engagement, if only the elected official with the “power to push the red button” is a decision-maker. In this instance, Mitchell is not condemning the structure of city government, but rather was condemning the former mayor. Using his coded metaphor of “the person who pushes the red button,” Mitchell explained that Reed was not sensitive to public opinion or even the legislation put forth by City Council. The term “personalities” does not have a negative connotation, however, the context used conveyed difficult personalities or strong personalities and offered this as a cause of the length of the dispute. Participants often referenced to politics or conflicting personalities as explanations for the perceived “messy” public dispute.

In contrast to the negative connotation attributed to the public political spectacle that dominated negotiations during the 3-year dispute, participants all implored positive descriptions of negotiations that took place in private, or behind closed doors. For instance, Meadows described that Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. stayed out of public negotiations, because they were not a signatory agency on the TAD. He went on to say that he worked with private money donated to promote BeltLine initiatives, whereas the TAD dealt with public funds. He said,

Chuck Meadows: It was already a politically messy situation that we shouldn't weigh into.

What I did do was reach out to, at the time, the chair of the Atlanta School Board Courtney English, and one of his fellow school board members Matt Westmoreland. And we had a series of conversations where we met privately in an effort to improve understanding around the issue, and perhaps develop some potential solutions.

Harkening to the negative connotation attributed to the public dispute, Meadows referred to the negotiations as “messy,” which discouraged him from weighing in publicly. However, he

met with school board members privately to help educate them in a way that would advocate for the BeltLine.

Meadow's name did not appear in media articles written at the time but was recommended by another participant as an actor to interview. Interview findings revealed involvement of policy actors not mentioned in media articles, the main one being Bill Rogers. Mitchell explained that he is an executive for SunTrust and carried significant weight within Atlanta's political scene. Mitchell spoke positively about his contributions to the negotiations, saying,

Cesar Mitchell: When I learned that he [Bill Rogers] was interceding quietly and behind the scenes to help out, that gave me a lot of confidence that we would find some resolution because he provided a lot of behind-the-scenes leadership and mediation on this.

Participants indicated that negotiations for deals similar to and including the Atlanta Beltline are best conducted behind closed doors. The public nature of the Atlanta Beltline renegotiation was a distraction and indicative of "politics" or "difficult personalities," as participants described them during interviews. While Mitchell discussed at the length efforts taken in 2005 to garner public input for the initial deal, he placed less emphasis on public input during the renegotiation process.

### ***The Public***

Throughout the interviews, I asked participants about what influenced them during negotiations for the BeltLine TAD. Participants referenced other policymakers, former elected officials, philanthropic leaders, and in a few instances, elite members of the business community. However, participants infrequently cited engaging with constituents as part of their decision-

making process, despite their concern that promises to original community residents were not met.

The influence of politics and elite constituents in this study indicated a shift in social practices involving the democratic process related to public redevelopment. In this case, some of the organizations involved were structured as "quasi-public," meaning they were created as stand-alone entities by public entities. This "quasi" nature results in distancing from democratic oversight that, in the case of the Atlanta BeltLine TAD, made opaque who exactly is responsible for contracts signed. In discussing the results of this governmental arrangement in terms of contractual obligations, Mitchell described the complications of this arrangement by saying, "Well, in a scenario like that... the city didn't have a technical legal obligation." Mitchell felt the city should "make good" on its entity (ABI), but this position caused tension with others in the city government, including Reed. The creation of a quasi-public entity to take over as a signatory on the contract pushed public input about decision-making even farther away.

This structuring also changed the way the public engaged with its city entities. Meadows explained Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. (ABI) and Atlanta BeltLine Partnerships (ABP) relationship as, "more of your people facing stuff is in the ABP whereas the ABI is responsible for the implementation of the project itself." He described the BeltLine Partnership's role to garner public support and help residents access the increasingly unaffordable development. However, Meadows played a role behind the scenes in advising elected officials about TADs in his role with the ABP. Even though Meadows served as an advocate and advisor to policymakers in negotiations, he was not elected.

Even among elected officials, the attitude about interacting with the public centered around informing versus gaining input. Regarding the appointed nine-member board of Invest Atlanta, which oversees the city's TADs, Westmoreland explained that the mayor chooses a nominated leader from one of Atlanta's 24 Neighborhood Planning Units "to answer your question about who represents the community." When asked, English stated that the school board held community meetings that served as information-sharing sessions to keep the public informed about the ongoing dispute.

Courtney English: It's always important to keep your constituents informed. But I think there's a time and place for that. And I also believe there's a time and place to get in a room and be quiet and get the deal done.

Dickens spoke about his constituents more than the other participants. He said his decisions and advocacy were a direct result of what they told him, and what he experienced through spending time with them and in their neighborhoods. As a result, he saw his role as bringing opposing parties together and referred to politics and personality clashes. In addition to serving as an at-large City Council Representative, Dickens sat on the board of Invest Atlanta and the Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. He explained that he was one of two board members to vote no for that year's budget because it did not include the PILOT repayment. This "no" vote got media attention, giving him a platform to step in and play a key role in negotiations and advocate for his constituents.

Andre Dickens: That gave me a lot of time to talk with the public about why I did what I did. So, then the meetings started happening between the school board chair, Courtney English, and the mayor, Kasim Reed. My job and a few others our

job was to keep pushing them back into the conversation. I'm dissatisfied until you all work it all out. I got a bunch of other people that are dissatisfied.

Dickens explained that he based his motivation and persistence on his constituents' dissatisfaction, highlighting the role of the democratic process in negotiations. While there were structural and attitudinal barriers related to public involvement, it seemed that, ultimately, the pressure from the public that Dickens referenced led to finalizing negotiations.

### **Against the Odds: Hope in the Face of Defeat**

*This past Friday was such a monumental moment in the history of this project. After years of disagreement and contentious negotiations, the City of Atlanta and Atlanta Public Schools reached resolution on a new agreement to fund the Atlanta BeltLine. The deal ensures substantial (and guaranteed) payments to APS in the years ahead to fund critical initiatives for kids, while protecting the future success of the BeltLine as the largest community development effort in the city's history.*

- Matt Westmoreland, *Atlanta Business Chronicle*, 2016

Analysis of media and interview discourse revealed a chasm between stated intentions to address issues involving affordability and the extent that actual policy outcomes reflected maintaining existing residents, as evidenced by changes in demographic data. Further, issues with the TAD renegotiation were numerous, including disagreements about PILOT payments, the worthiness of APS' schools, and the nature of politics and partnership. However, against these odds, participants maintained their faith in TADs as an economic tool for revitalization. Participants often referred to the power of partnership in Atlanta forming the TAD and the potential educational impact as rationale for their unwavering support of the policy.

*Power of Partnership in Atlanta*

Despite the discrepancy between the TAD's stated intent and its outcomes, specifically affordable housing, participants maintained a firm conviction to improve Atlanta through the tradition of public partnership with the business community. For participants, evidence of these convictions lay within what they referred to as "good faith" negotiations, frequently cited in the media discourse about partnership. The reason the BeltLine TAD fell short on delivering its stated promises to community members, in participants' views, resulted from collaborations incongruent with the true nature of the city. Mitchell alluded to this tradition:

Cesar Mitchell:       The second piece I think we have missed, and I still can't understand why we have not embraced, this because this is the city of Atlanta. We are the city of Atlanta, and the history of working together between communities and demographics is a very long and strong standing one. But the fact that we do not have a policy of creating community benefits agreements to me is just confusing and bizarre.

Mitchell underscored his disbelief that city leaders failed to deliver the affordability he viewed as possible through the TAD. Mitchell referenced Atlanta's history as a reason to believe in the city's capability to overcome these previously missed opportunities. Through this framing, Mitchell characterized the BeltLine TAD dispute as an outlier in the tradition of Atlanta politics. He said,

Cesar Mitchell:       I can figure out 100 different ways to create a community benefits agreement. You know, in a way that would make the community feel comfortable, but also in a way that would give the developer, or the business



interests a way to negotiate, renegotiate if things don't turn out how they're supposed to turn out. I think that has been a critical missed opportunity not just for our city but again for Atlanta to create a model and lead the way and be a shining beacon around the country and world. Our communities and businesses work together to advance the cause of economic development in the community.

Mitchell again called for city leaders to live up to the tradition of partnership between the city and business community to enact change that benefits everyone. Further, he envisioned Atlanta as a leader to "create a model and lead the way." These reflections indicated he attributed the failed outcomes of the BeltLine TAD to people not collaborating well or working hard to ensure promises were met.

Like Mitchell, all participants blamed not meeting the promise of affordability on not pushing hard to ensure promises for affordability came to fruition. This framing upheld the policy as a valid method for enacting redevelopment that lifts everyone without displacing or pricing out existing residents. Interviewees contended that if leaders had "leaned in" more, the goal of affordability would have happened. Further, participants still hoped that partnership and more work could rectify the TAD's problems, despite their acknowledgment that in many places along the BeltLine, it was likely too late to retain existing residents already priced out.

Although he emphasized improved partnership, Mitchell's description of the BeltLine's partnership indicated that the circumstances were less than ideal. While Mitchell held that Atlanta is a city created by powerful partnerships, he alluded to the idea that partnerships were not

always entered into mutually. For instance, Mitchell referred to the partnership surrounding the BeltLine negotiations as a "shotgun wedding."

Cesar Mitchell: The shotgun wedding had already occurred, and we were all married and pregnant. So, in other words, what I mean by that is, the BeltLine, the City of Atlanta, Invest Atlanta, and the school system, we're all in the same boat at this point.

To slit the throat of one person was not going to help that boat get, you know, get to shore.

Mitchell illustrated the position policy actors inherited in 2013 in response to the original contract in 2005. While he referred to being in the same boat, he also described the tensions that existed. Mitchell's imagery communicated his position that the only solution was to work together.

Despite the tensions identified by participants interviewed between the stated intent of the TAD and the outcomes, particularly those around affordability, a firm conviction to improve Atlanta using the mechanism of TADs came through in each interview. In instances where the TAD created new problems, including unaffordability, participants blamed not working together.

### ***Educational Impact***

*The BeltLine and the economic development it helps generate will create jobs once our students graduate from high school and/or college.*

- Matt Westmoreland, *The Atlanta Business Chronicle*, 2016

On its face, the Atlanta BeltLine TAD is not an educational policy. However, the project's reliance on TAD funding directly impacts the local school district. Beyond this funding structure, the Atlanta BeltLine influences educational policy because it is related to housing and thus strongly tied to attendance zones and property tax revenue. Policies affecting housing and

public infrastructure inherently impact education since they are a primary predictor of who will live in a given area. While the BeltLine's educational impact was a theme in media and interview discourse (research questions 1 and 2), these themes at times competed with actual policy outcomes, as evidenced by demographic shifts within the 14 schools on the BeltLine (research question 3).

Media discourse about the BeltLine renegotiation often invoked education and children as leverage points for the negotiation. In retrospective interviews, participants echoed this theme. Then school board chair, English, emphasized the impact of education and children on negotiations.

Courtney English: I think any reasonable person can agree that you shouldn't leave kids holding the bag for development deals. I also think that doesn't really need it. You know, I don't need to add any extra puffery. It is a pretty straightforward thing.

In English's view, his positionality during negotiations was advantageous for this very reason. In general, the public was sympathetic to the needs of schools, education, and the city's children. He explained that for those negotiating for the school district, no additional "puffery" was required. This illustration speaks to the political nature of public negotiations and the public relations work that ensures public buy-in. However, the involvement of children eliminated this need. Further, his metaphor of "leaving kids holding the bag" highlights the development's financial investment and interdependence. However, the vivid metaphor evoked of leaving school children holding the bag of development underscores the TAD's educational impact. While this

imagery positively impacted the negotiations, to what extent did it play out in lived effects for the city's children and their educational experiences?

Other interviewees also cited the need for "partnership," as Mitchell explained it, and "buy-in," according to Meadows, to make the TAD a feasible funding model. Dickens went further and described the public as valuing education over business.

Andre Dickens: They [constituents] don't want to see anything that promotes business that doesn't fairly make sure schools are taken care of. Everybody has a soft spot for the youth and their education, which as it should be. Any organization can have a ribbon-cutting, applause, press releases for a tax break. But if you don't take care of something that a school system needs (teacher pay, school infrastructure), it is unpopular.

Dickens and Westmoreland both underscored the BeltLine's connection to jobs bolstering the business community. Dickens pointed out that the business community has a vested interest in an educated workforce, further cementing their commitment to APS school funding.

Since the Atlanta BeltLine TAD encompasses a large geographic area (about 2,500 acres and 8% of the city), several schools were impacted. At the beginning of the project in 2004 and when TAD renegotiations began in 2013, 14 schools sat within half a mile of the BeltLine TAD. These schools were primarily clustered on the south side of the city, serving predominantly Black students, many of whom were low-income. I considered the demographics of these 14 schools at the beginning of the BeltLine TAD renegotiations in 2012 and eight years later in 2020. During this time period, three schools became even more economically exclusive, E. Rivers, Iman, and Grady High (Table 6). The enrollment of students receiving free and reduced

lunch (FRL) decreased from 2012 to 2020, between 24% and 37% for these three schools. In contrast, the remaining schools continued to serve an increasing number of students classified as FRL. Many of these schools also dealt with declining enrollment, likely exacerbated by the impact of economic insecurity affecting access to virtual schooling during the COVID 19 pandemic. Declining enrollments were cited as the main reason to *close* three schools on the Belt-Line, Herndon, Capitol View, and Parks (C. English, personal communication, March 28, 2021).

**Table 6**

*APS Schools on the BeltLine: Changes in Economic Demographics*

School	2012		2020	
	Total Enrollment	FRL	Total Enrollment	FRL
E. Rivers*	677	41.6%*	716	17.5%*
Herndon (closed 2018)			-	-
Jones MA	547	<95%	470	<95%
Capitol View (closed 2013)			-	-
Slater	563	<95%	472	<95%
Stanton DH	266	<95%	285	<95%
Hope	354	<90%	342	<95%
Inman*	988	36.7%*	1,189	8.8%*
Brown	717	<95%	390	<95%
Parks (closed 2014)	155	<95%	-	-
Washington High	865	<95%	848	<95%
Carver High	1,174	<90%	439	<95%
South Atlanta	923	<90%	848	<95%
Grady High*	1,405	46.9%*	1,518	9.8%*

*Note:* \* represented a change <5%.

In addition to economic demographic shifts, three schools the BeltLine experienced notable changes in racial demographics between 2012 and 2020 (Table 7). Hope, Inman, and Grady High each saw decreases in enrollment of Black students between 5% and 23% and increases in enrollment of White students between 6% and 17%. Inman and Grady are the most economically affluent schools on the BeltLine, as measured by FRL data presented in Table 6. This data indicated that the most substantial decreases of Black students occurred in the most affluent schools. Further, DH Stanton, located on the impending Southside Trail, and Brown, located on the most recently built BeltLine Westside Trails, showed increased of Black students, and decreases of White students around 3% respectively, indicating that further changes may be imminent.

**Table 7***APS Schools on the BeltLine: Changes in Racial Demographics*

School	2012		2020	
	Black	White	Black	White
E. Rivers**	28.1%	42.0%	27.1%*	44.6%
Herndon (closed 2018)			-	-
Jones MA	97.07	0	95.7%	>1%
Capitol View (closed 2013)			-	-
Slater	96.3%	>1%	97.5%	>1%
Stanton DH	97%	>1%	94.03%	2.80%
Hope*	91.0%*	>1%*	85.4%*	7.0%*
Inman*	46.7%*	43.7%*	31.2%*	51.1%*
Brown	97.6%	>1%	94.4%	>1%
Parks (closed 2014)	96.8%	0	-	-
Washington High	98.0%	>1%	97.41%	>1%
Carver High	97.9%	0	97.0%	0
South Atlanta	98.7%*	>1%	91.4%*	<1%
Grady High*	61.6%*	28.5%*	37.7%*	45.6%*

*Note:* \* represented a change <5%. \*\* Indicates schools with Hispanic populations <15%.

While these data do not track individual families to identify the extent of displacement, they are consistent with economic and racial changes characteristic of gentrification (Easton et al., 2020).

Several participants also noticed the impact of these demographic shifts. Mitchell, for example, when discussing whether or not the generation of APS students whose tax revenue supported the redevelopment would be priced out of the city, replied stating, “That is where we are now. That potential is more likely than not. Unfortunately.”

### *Unwavering Support for TADs*

Despite the candid and direct acknowledgment that the Atlanta BeltLine TAD fell short of its promise to increase affordability for city residents, all five participants held fast to the concept of TADs as the right solution to enact the type of urban revitalization they hoped for. In explaining this gap, participants pointed to problems with the execution of the TAD or outside factors as causes of failed results regarding accountability instead of TADs themselves.

Courtney English: The BeltLine has the potential to be a catalytic project for the City of Atlanta and actually bring people together and bring development to neighborhoods that have not seen development in a long time, if ever.

I do think overall, though, just specifically from a school system perspective, that at the end of the TAD, we will see the school system receive a huge property tax boost in revenues because of the BeltLine.

The adjective "catalytic" emphasized English's belief and support of TADs as a valuable and valid economic tool. He used language similar to other participants in referring to neighborhoods that "haven't seen development in a long time, if ever." Highlighting the need to address chronic disinvestment, participants looked to TADs as the best, if not the only way to bring development and amenities to these areas. Meadows also defended TADs from his current vantage point of a School Director at a school not far from the BeltLine, saying that,

Chuck Meadows: I have more experience in economic development and sort of public sector management than I do in education, right. I am a fundamental supporter of tax allocation districts and the impact they have to turn communities around.



I don't think that there has been a healthy level of buy-in, as far as that concept is concerned, within the educational community. So, I think where I would land is probably somewhere in the middle. I think there's some things that we can do differently and better in terms of how we structure our TADs and how they impact the schools. But in my opinion, the overall potential benefit that TADs can bring to a neighborhood and to a community, is definitely worth it. If they are done right, it can turn a neighborhood around. They have to be managed correctly, right. You have to have the right guidelines and administrative procedures in place, but I continue to be a believer in the potential that TADs have to spur development where development would otherwise either not happen or take a long time.

Meadows emphasized TADs' potential to change neighborhoods and provide widespread benefits to communities through economic development. He underscored that this development could take place where it "would otherwise either not happen or take a long time." For Meadows, TADs can address equity in disinvested neighborhoods and is "definitely worth it." Similarly, Westmoreland looked to TADs as a solution to "drive development in parts of town that haven't seen it in a lot time." He said,

Matt Westmoreland: That is a benefit to APS families and children so long as they get to actually stay in the neighborhood and enjoy the amenity. So I was a fan. I understood the reality that existed between a years-long lawsuit and long recession that the BeltLine was not in a position to make any meaningful progress on its mission while also paying these PILOT payments.

Westmoreland again harkened to the “potential” benefit of the BeltLine to APS families if they are not displaced. His “fan” status evidenced his commitments to TADs and their “mission” to address economic underdevelopment. His support of the BeltLine TAD did not waiver, despite his recognition that previously agreed upon repayments to APS were untenable.

For all participants, Atlanta wins when the city and the school district partner together in forging economic development that benefits all residents. TADs, in their view, are policies that accomplish this goal. Out of all the participants, Mitchell has used TADs for almost 20 years, through his work with Atlanta’s 10 TADs. Throughout our interview, he detailed specifics of these TADs and highlighted the impact on surrounding communities. Towards the end of our time together, I followed up on Mitchell's statement about pricing APS students out of an area financed by taxes intended for their education. He again pointed to the need for a good community benefits agreement, expressed dismay that one did not yet exist, and then concluded:

Cesar Mitchell: Maybe, maybe, maybe, maybe I'm just too optimistic about the ability of people to work together and trust one another and get things done and be flexible. Or maybe I'm too naive, quite frankly, about how strong people's desire to make money is.

Mitchell's statement initially emphasized that failed partnership is the problem rather than the TAD policy, consistent with his view throughout his interview and other participants’ interviews. However, in his final reflections, he pondered the possibility that "people's desire to make money" also played a part in the TAD not yet fulfilling the shared hope that implementation rather than the entity was at fault.

The findings depicted discursive framing embodied by metaphors of the “odds,” representing policy issues that were uneven or unequal. Taken together, media discourse describing the BeltLine TAD depicted a dispute presented as a dramatic spectacle that criticized feuding policymakers (“at odds”). Within discursive framing, policy details were not debated, rather the BeltLine TAD was championed as paramount due to the economic prosperity that discourse attributed to the project without question (“stacking the odds”). In terms of education, “helping kids” became a negotiation strategy juxtaposed with critiques undermining APSs’ credibility (“beating the odds”). While discourse acknowledged that many original residents lost faith that promises made would come to fruition, democratic involvement was minimized in favor of behind-the-scenes compromise representing partnership between APS and the COA (“whose odds”). Interview discourse highlighted tensions with the policy issues created by the BeltLine TAD, including displacement and affordability in adjacent neighborhoods. Despite acknowledgement and evidence showing that many low-income, primarily Black students were pushed out of neighboring schools due to the project, media and policymaker discourse maintained unwavering hope in the potential of TADs to enact economic growth (“against the odds”). These results brought up several policy issues that I discuss in the following chapter, along with implications for policymakers, community members, and educational leaders.

## 5 DISCUSSION

In this study, I examined how social policies impacting education are discursively framed in media articles and by policymakers. The guiding questions were:

1. What does discourse about the Atlanta BeltLine TAD renegotiation reveal about social practices around policy impacting education?
2. What do retrospective accounts of policymakers centrally involved reveal about convergences, divergences, and tensions during the BeltLine TAD renegotiation?
3. How do discursive representations of the BeltLine TAD renegotiation align with impacts on adjacent communities?

In this chapter, I discuss the findings within the larger socio-context of neoliberal ordering guided by the critical examinations of power as outlined in Chapter 2. First, I discuss the major findings from the research questions. Then I delineate implications for policymakers, educators, community stakeholders, and researchers. I conclude with considerations for future research and reflections on the overarching theme of who the odds actually favor.

### **Discussion of Findings**

A critical discourse and policy studies approach revealed that the neoliberal BeltLine TAD created problems around affordability and displacement. Study findings highlighted that discourse centered on aiming to implement TADs while still maintaining the promise of affordability for current residents, despite the well-documented failure of this promise (Erickson, 2011; Greenbaum & Landers, 2014; Weber, 2010). Consistent with the ideological assumptions comprising the neoliberal imaginary (Ball, 2012), including promoting market-based solutions and the private sector, TADs do not generate economic growth for neighborhood residents but rather put capital into circulation. For economic growth to happen, community residents without capital

must be pushed out, “revitalizing” neighborhoods to facilitate accumulation by those with capital, which Harvey (2004) refers to as accumulation by dispossession. While media discourse acknowledged some of the problems created by TADs, most participant-discourse still clung to the market-based strategy as the ultimate tool for neighborhood change, representing a policy paradox in which the claims did not match the outcomes. I also discuss this policy paradox’s implications for negotiating social policies that impact education, TAD outcomes and affordability, quasi-public structuring, the relationship between education and gentrification.

### ***Neoliberalism and Negotiating Social Policies Impacting Education***

Findings revealed a socio-political landscape grappling with the aftermath of a neoliberal development policy unable to actualize the promises used to legitimize its inception, including revitalization for all and affordable housing. This reality is not unique to TADs or the BeltLine but rather is indicative of the unsustainability of neoliberalism revealed by the Great Recession in 2007 and 2008 (Beckert, 2020; Berry, 2014). Despite the realization that neoliberal policies failed to make good on their promises, results indicated that the dominant political landscape has not yet abandoned the promise of neoliberalism as a whole and instead focused on reforming perceived failings of implementation. This socio-political context is currently working hard to troubleshoot neoliberalism into a paradigm compatible with equity, a problem exacerbated by these very policies. Largely adhering to neoliberal ordering (Ball, 2012; Harvey, 2005a), policy-makers in this study focused on economic development to solve social problems, including education, affordability, and equity. Data indicated that affordability issues, including displacement and gentrification, were often constituted as unintended, or even necessary, side effects of economic development, as seen in the “double-edged sword” analogy.

The discourse used to legitimate the BeltLine TAD relied on promises of future improvement for all stakeholders through an augmented tax base, including current residents, gentrifying residents, developers, and APS. Relying on a sense of hope maintained the neoliberal imaginary and put into motion continued use of a policy with documented shortcomings. While media articles and participants acknowledged that the TAD required a degree of sacrifice for APS and their stakeholders (25 years of property tax increases going to the TAD), the attitude was that this was a minor setback for a major comeback in terms of the “potential” for considerable increases in property tax. This discursive frame required an over-reliance on what Beckert (2020) called “promissory legitimacy,” in which political actors leverage “potential” future outcomes as a form of legitimacy. Similar to her findings, I also found within discourse analyzed an over-reliance on promissory legitimacy instead of input legitimacy (emanating from resident desires) or output legitimacy (emanating from documented policy outcomes).

The neoliberal paradigm further troubles traditional means of policy analysis necessitating the use of a critical policy approach. While policy analysis often purports to consider policy outcomes in determining the success of a particular plan, discourse within neoliberalism does not include discussion of outcomes but rather the potential or promises associated with a particular policy. Outcomes are not the primary driver of “what works,” but rather the intention and promise of a policy are now the key sources of legitimation. I found this to be the case as I spoke with study-participants. Repeatedly, they expressed that the problems arising from the BeltLine TAD reflected mal implementation. Policymakers framed the issues resulting from the renegotiated TAD as evidence of an imperfectly executed TAD instead of being aware that the TAD itself might be the problem. This finding is significant for those concerned with resisting neoliberal

policies impacting education. As such, critiquing policy discourse using promissory language such as “opportunity,” “potential,” and “promise” is increasingly important.

### ***TADs and the Discourse Around “Affordability”***

Policymakers interviewed frequently discussed the issue of affordability in relation to the BeltLine TAD. Discursively, the term “affordability,” through its ubiquitous use over the past decade, now has a more emotive than descriptive meaning, contributing to the power of language to influence policy (Fairclough, 1989). Jacobs and Manzi (1996), in their analysis of discourse and housing policy change, indicated that the construct “affordability” within housing policy discussions took shape in the 1980s, and now the use of the word is ubiquitous. As a result, “affordability” evokes a specific ideological conception mediated by previous discursive frames of public housing (Leonardo & Hunter, 2009; Lipsitz, 2011), including deficit perspectives about those experiencing housing insecurity (Jacobs & Manzi, 1996). When affordability accompanies an existing concept, such as housing or cities in general, it now has a uniformly positive connotation often leveraged as an appeal to morality. As a result, policy discussions that mention affordability became increasingly difficult to question.

While media discourse about the BeltLine TAD prominently included affordability, absent were discourses around living wages and racial and gendered wage-gaps. While affordability purports to address a naturally occurring problem, discursively, the term affordability masks the root causes of economic inequity and systemic structures that underpay workers. This discursive ordering supports market-based policy solutions since discussions exclude failed economic policies. In doing so, neoliberal policies gain legitimacy and take center stage in media discourse. For example, Borum Chattoo et al. (2021) found that 85% of newspaper articles in 2018

across 12 major cities about housing affordability discussed private partnerships or government subsidies to developers, and 15% discussed subsidized low-income housing. While policy discourse continues to privilege market-based solutions, including public-private partnerships, economic inequity is accelerating in cities, including Atlanta (Foster & Lu, 2018).

Findings largely indicated that TADs and affordability are inherently oppositional aims. While policymakers blamed implementation rather than TAD structuring, factors that mitigate displacement within economic development do not yet fully address the problem. Building affordable housing and addressing “blighted” areas is the stated goal of TADs. However, it is well-documented that the practice primarily benefits suburban and wealthier parts of cities (Harris & Metzger, 2018) and promotes gentrification. Despite this evidence and the warning that the project was untenable (Beckert, 2020; Berry, 2014), the discourse in this study reinforced TADs as a means to achieve increased affordability. In looking at the effects of the development a decade later, economic inequity increased in BeltLine neighborhoods, as indicated by changes in school demographics.

### ***Quasi-Public Structuring and Democratic Participation***

Results also demonstrated the effects of neoliberal ordering on democratic participation. Discourse about the BeltLine TAD renegotiation revealed increasingly distant public input and engagement avenues within the democratic process. This distance was in part facilitated by increased reliance on quasi-public organizations overseeing economic growth, such as the Invest Atlanta and The BeltLine Inc. Quasi-Public structuring indicated shifts in the social practices around neoliberal governance. In these arrangements, a public entity with direct public oversight uses its authority to create a subsidiary organization that operates as a quasi-independent, quasi-



public corporation with little to no public oversight (Bourdeaux, 2007; Eger, 2006; Landow & Ebdon, 2012). Like concerns about charter schools and lack of oversight, this arrangement brings about new questions for school districts entering into contracts with quasi-public organizations. When things go wrong, who is responsible? In the case of the dispute of the Atlanta BeltLine TAD, the City of Atlanta pointed to this distancing to discursively shift responsibility away from themselves even though they created the Atlanta BeltLine, Inc.

Ultimately, quasi-public structuring exacerbates inequitable power structures. Distancing public input from TADs is not unique to Atlanta (Weber, 2010) and quasi-governmental agencies are used to execute TIFs in other cities, such as St Louis (Harris & Metzger, 2018). Increased oversight over these entities is crucial, considering that Bauroth (2009) found that localities' use of quasi-public agencies was less related to economic need and instead related to the private sector entrepreneurship in communities. I found infrequent mention of quasi-public structuring in discourse about the BeltLine TAD. However, related discourse did not question such entities' efficacy to best carry out the BeltLine development or other city economic growth initiatives. Neoliberal ideology consistently positions the private sector as superior to the public sector, which contributes to quasi-public ordering.

### ***Education as a Discursive Pawn for Negotiations***

Tax Allocation Districts directly impact education through reliance on a portion of property taxes being redirected from local school districts to finance redevelopment projects. Elected officials from local school boards and city councils negotiate these policies that impact public schools' tax bases. From a critical policy studies lens, a practice of problematizing reveals how problems are described and created from policy (Bacchi, 2009). Understanding how

policymakers constitute the issues resulting from TAD policies, including lack of affordability, is paramount for education. In this case, the BeltLine TAD put educational funds into circulation, positioning education as a discursive pawn and means to an economic end.

Rhetorically, appeals to emotion, values, and morality are often used for educational aims and policies (Edwards et al., 2004). Education and children are positioned as of utmost importance and presented as a value-laden issue. Such appeals were used to legitimate school closures, takeovers, and privatizing when deemed “underperforming” (Buras, 2015). TADs complicate the notion that education is most important, which in turn requires policymakers to legitimize decisions that shift resources away from children. In the discourse about the BeltLine TAD, policymakers addressed this potential contradiction in a few ways. Some rationalized that investing in the BeltLine actually benefited the same children sacrificing a portion of the tax-base designated for their education as a delayed investment. This concept echoed the theme that a minor setback now would result in a significant comeback in substantially increased revenue in the future.

While education was discursively leveraged in negotiating the value of urban space, the material implications cannot be ignored. Shifts in funding formulas through TADs put money allocated for education into circulation and at the mercy of the market, with detrimental effects during the 2008 recession. While the promissory legitimation of the structuring leverages on potential future “windfalls” of increased property tax revenue, the practice bears down on current students, teachers, and communities in the form of decreased revenue (Nguyen-Hoang, 2014; Weber, 2003). The impact of increased urban entrepreneurship to compete for development to increase the tax base on schools is not new (Szabo, 1995). Since TADs are related to more

reduction in educational expenditures in economically and racially marginalized communities (Nguyen-Hoang, 2014), the educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) is too high to rely on market-based solutions as a legitimate mode of increasing tax bases supporting schools.

### ***Race and Space***

The BeltLine TAD opened large corridors of urban space for increased market-based economic growth and consumption. Such neoliberal public redevelopment projects reinforce real-estate as a tool to enact White supremacy. To this end, coded racial language and neoliberal discourse, including “autonomy” and “personal responsibility,” legitimized gentrification. As some participants in this study acknowledged, TADs only “work” in specific spatial areas, namely desirable downtown areas ripe for gentrification (Teresa, 2017). After city governments abandoned many urban centers in the '60s following White flight (Kruse, 2005), the space now deemed profitable is intertwined with historical and current racial politics largely mediated by White supremacy.

As with many other urban redevelopment projects, discourse about the BeltLine TAD utilized racial codes to characterize space in ways legitimizing takeover. Despite frequent discussion of affordability, gentrification, and displacement, direct mentions of the intersections of race and economics were almost entirely absent from policymaker discourse. TADs hinge on racial codes to gain legitimacy through the standard requirement for the development space to be considered “blighted.” As Lipsitz (2011) points out, White people have been warned since the 1940s to avoid purchasing property in areas that “might bring some form of blight to an otherwise respectable area.” (p. 25). While Georgia does not use the word “blight,” the Development Powers Law, § 36-44-2 (2010), refers to “economically and socially depressed areas” that have a

“deleterious effect upon the public health, safety, morals, and welfare.” While this policy does not explicitly mention race, it evoked the Black special imaginary Lipsitz (2011) described.

Further, the Georgia Development Powers Law stroked racialized notions of public and private. The statute reads:

To encourage such redevelopment, it is essential that the counties and municipalities of this state have additional powers to form a more effective partnership with private enterprise to overcome economic limitations that have previously impeded or prohibited redevelopment of such areas § 36-44-2 (2010).

The racially coded language describing many neighborhoods targeted as blighted or dilapidated relied on racist stereotypes to convey a negative connotation as a negotiating tactic.

In addition to racially coded language, results are consistent with the discourse around “obsolescence,” identified by Weber (2002) as “a neoliberal alibi for creative destruction.” (p. 532). In the BeltLine case, the former Atlanta Rail Tracks were deemed obsolete (Alex Garvin & Associates, 2004). Obsolescence reinforces neoliberalism since it functions neutrally, devoid of implications for race and acknowledgment of failed social policies exacerbating economic inequity. Even though markets themselves contribute to obsolescence, neoliberal framing shifts blame away from policymakers and developers. Neoliberal discourse deflects criticism by countering that any opposition is arguing for the status quo and inequitable geographic development.

Ultimately, projects like the Atlanta BeltLine TAD reinforce current White supremacist patterns in real-estate. Aligned with national trends over the past few decades, increasingly more affluent and White residents seek city living (Kruse, 2005). However, many urban centers are not currently deemed palatable after 40 years of White flight and disinvestment in city centers.

Ignoring the irony of trying to fix a problem caused by the same people, neoliberalism offers practical strategies to transform cities' landscapes. Despite discourse claiming to improve communities, this transformation is more characteristic of re-shifting people to city outskirts and suburbs (Oakley et al., 2010) than positively impacting residents' economic realities.

### **Implications and Policy Recommendations**

The central question arising from this study is: What can we do, if anything, to address the problems created by the BeltLine TAD, namely affordability and displacement? As with all neoliberal policies, resistance poses unique challenges since neoliberal ordering is characterized by its adaptability and resistance. Ultimately, radical rethinking and rejection of neoliberal discourse and practices must reimagine the possibilities post neoliberalism. However, people need help now. Therefore, policy recommendations represent both theoretical, big-picture shifts and smaller-scale, right-now strategies that may offer a bit of relief.

### ***City Leaders and Policymakers***

The current sociopolitical landscape, grappling with problems created by neoliberal policies enacted over the previous four decades, poses serious challenges for policymakers. When considering the issue of TADs, addressing wage-gaps, and resisting displacement, policymakers must stop centering and protecting markets and instead focus on the inherent value of people, their constituents. To resist the neoliberal state that subjugates people in negating value outside of their consuming activities (Brown, 2003), policymakers must view constituents as important regardless of their ability to generate revenue. To carry this out, policymakers must replace current discursive practices reflecting neoliberal ideology. Teresa (2017) underscored the importance of this shift from instrumental policy rationales (based on 'practical' reason) to value policy rationales (based on morality). Further, policymakers should work towards a

problematizing approach when vetting potential policies. It is clear that “good intentions” as a policy rationale is not good enough. Instead, policymakers must actively consider new problems created by a proposed policy, such as using Bacchi’s (2009) “What is the Problem Represented to Be?” approach. Along with shifts in discourse used during negotiations, several policy approaches inform more equitable city governance practices.

**Entering TADs.** First, if using TADs for economic development projects, adjust the frozen tax base each year for inflation (Greenbaum & Landers, 2014). Policymakers should also consider amending current TADs to reflect annual inflation. Since TADs span at least 20 years, freezing without inflation which is the current practice, is inherently inequitable. Secondly, it is vital to shift the current power-dynamics. As is the case with the BeltLine TAD, projected future revenue backs bonds that fund developers’ costs. The rationale behind this approach is to incentivize developers in areas where they otherwise would not take the risk, however, since projections are often inaccurate, this creates instability for public entities front-loading developers’ costs. To shift this dynamic, TADs should require developers to supply the initial investment cost and then be paid back with TAD increments. This structuring prevents the problems leading to the BeltLine renegotiation since bonds are not required. Thirdly, only use TADs to reflect current residents’ needs and wants and directly benefit the property owners and employees in the region. Creating parameters that require community-led development goals as a requirement to entering a TAD resists current neoliberal ordering that “let the market decide,” positioning TADs as generating economic growth by any means necessary. When the market-decides, displacement occurs. Insisting that development reflects the needs of current communities works to resist this ideological and policy norm.

**Reframing the Problem: Addressing Wage-Gaps and Underpaid Work.** Considering the incompatibility of neoliberal policies and affordability, city leaders must dismantle current systems that undervalue people and work. Since discourse simultaneously reflects and constructs policies and policy problems, it is important to attend to the problems created (and avoided) through the discourse policymakers use to describe issues. To this end, discourse offers promise in reframing policy problems. Instead of leveraging affordability as the problem, policymakers should highlight problems around wage stagnation, undervalued work, and inequitable racial and gender wage and wealth gaps. Efforts towards increasing affordability must include mandates and measures to ensure a living wage for all residents. This is particularly important, considering Funderburg's (2019) finding in Iowa that non-government jobs decreased in a TIF area. While this is not the case in the Atlanta BeltLine TAD, it is the case that many of the jobs created are in the service and hospitality industry, which currently undervalue labor (Dogru et al., 2019).

**Resisting Displacement.** A primary focus for community policymakers must center on reducing displacement and fighting for development reflective of needs and wants. Recently, inclusionary zoning has gained popularity as an ameliorative policy for affordability (Harris & Metzger, 2018). However, in Atlanta, two years of inclusionary zoning on the BeltLine resulted in 362 affordable units, while the need increased from 26,000 households to over 28,000 households over the same period (D. O. C. P. Atlanta, 2021). Without shifts in discursive and codified measures to ensure living wages for citizens, more affordable housing will not ultimately stop displacement since poverty and economic instabilities are the root causes. Erickson (2011) recommended requiring development agencies to directly work with current residents, keeping track of who is there before, and assisting those who (hopefully) want to stay as the area increases in

property value. Coupled with building affordable housing as the first phase of a project, these measures should work in tandem with concerted efforts to ensure a viable living wage for constituents. Together, these efforts show promise towards improved economic realities for residents living in communities experiencing revitalization. To enact this change, it is important to shift focus away from the monetary value of a space in terms of generating revenue and instead invest in the people living there.

### ***Educational Policymakers***

While the neoliberal imaginary purports to be the only alternative, this is not the case. It is possible to maintain the educational tax base and fund public infrastructure and revitalization. Educational leaders and policymakers must utilize the leverage they have over local tax policies. Due to the interdependence between city governments and school districts in sharing the property tax base, educational leaders are uniquely positioned to demand policies that include paying a living wage to families and school employees who are impacted. District leaders should ensure the viability of such conditions before agreeing to redevelopment policies using tax money. Unlike most other states (Weber, 2003), in Georgia, school districts can opt-out of TADs, as seen recently during the failed Gulch TAD negotiations (Trubey & Deere, 2018). In addition to TADs, educational policymakers must stand up against tax abatements and other loopholes frequently used to incentive development at the expense of public municipalities, including schools (Szabo, 1995). As recommended by participant Chuck Meadows, schools may also consider establishing specific direct benefits built into the TAD. This practice could be especially impactful for schools serving high proportions of students receiving free and reduced lunch, an indicator of increased economic insecurity.



Further, educational policymakers must resist market-based solutions and discourse positioning schools as solutions to the failed social safety net. These aims go hand in hand, as such discourse is often leveraged to negotiate increased market-based solutions. Arrangements such as TADs that increase the tax base positively impact educational achievement primarily through displacing lower-income families so that more affluent families may accumulate the “revitalized” space. While improved standardized test scores are still touted by school districts and community stakeholders as evidence of improved schools (APS, 2019), the reality remains that these test scores correlate most strongly with family and community demographics (Tienken et al., 2017). Educational policymakers should consider partnering with city and community leaders to advocate for educational funding formulas that are less dependent on local property taxes. Moving away from this traditional funding structure would break up the current pattern of elite public schools within wealthy enclaves and serve as a more equitable distribution of educational resources. Dismantling the system in which schools are bound to their communities’ economic realities reinforces the socioeconomic stratification of education. While schools are not a solution to inequitable distribution of wealth, underfunding schools in poor communities exacerbates the problem. To address this issue, states should augment incompletely funded districts (Szabo, 1995; Wickert, 1985) while also imposing limits to local TAD and tax abatement practices to ensure equity across geographic areas.

### ***Community Stakeholders***

More than ever, community stakeholders must penetrate and expand the ever-tightening avenues for public discourse and input. White and economically privileged community stakeholders have an additional burden of insisting that spaces for democratic participation widen and

include those historically and currently excluded while simultaneously resisting structures that benefit those of us with unearned advantage. Within this advocacy, community stakeholders should lean into output legitimacy, focusing on policy outcomes, and shift away from promissory legitimacy discourse, focusing on policy potential (Beckert, 2020).

One such example of a kind of coalition needed to resist the negative impacts of TADs is the Team TIF initiative in St. Louis (Harris & Metzger, 2018). This community-led group focuses on disseminating policy research within their community via presentations, social media, and student involvement to raise awareness about the impact of tax abatements and TIFs in the area. Through infographics, Team TIF efficiently makes explicit many of the problematic issues commonly negotiated behind the scenes to hold TIF proposers accountable. For example, Team TIF advocates replacing school funding, ensuring all jobs pay a living wage, and instilling protective provisions if a developer defaults on their financials, stalling the public project's progress. Similar TIF watch groups resist the neoliberal policy in cities including Kansas City, Los Angeles, and New York. Atlanta needs a community-led TAD initiative that works with community members and researchers to communicate details of current TADs, increasing transparency. Such an initiative seems to be the most feasible way to highlight when policy outcomes do not match stated intentions and bring to the forefront the interworking of such deals.

As pointed out by participant Ceasar Mitchell, community benefits agreements (CBAs) offer promise to contractually ensure prioritizing current residents is a forethought instead of waiting for potential increased tax revenue in 20+ years after the TAD expires. CBAs work towards re-democratizing city development practices by requiring neighborhood representation on the project (Harris & Metzger, 2018), such as on Invest Atlanta or the applicable quasi-

governmental agency overseeing economic development. Research shows that while CBAs provide residents with some protections, they do not guarantee that the agreement will be enforced (Marantz, 2015). As such, Marantz (2015) called for additional protections for existing residents and realistic expectations around the scope of protection that a CBA offers.

Finally, community stakeholders must engage critically with media discourse framing policy issues including TADs. Mass closures of local newspapers led to shifts towards more syndicated newspaper sources that reflect increasingly corporate ownership and interests (Abernathy, 2018). As a result, local perspectives and watch-dog fact checking of local politics, particularly from the points of view of Black and non-White residents, are increasingly limited. For instance, research indicates that the closure of local newspapers resulted in political polarization (Darr et al., 2018) and increases in local corporate fraud seemingly due to lack of accountability from the press (Heese et al., 2021). As such, community leaders must advocate for maintaining local news sources representing and written from the perspectives of communities. Further, community leaders should encourage criticality when engaging with the media that promotes holding sources accountable for instances of slant, bias, and racial codes.

While there is much work to be done and several potential avenues to shift current power imbalances, I recognize that neoliberalism is continuously adapting and shifting shape to fill the fissures created by city, educational, and community leaders' resistance efforts. To this end, the resistance process must be two-fold, drawing both on discursive ideology shifts reframing policy projects created by neoliberalism and on codified policies limiting current market-facilitation practices.

### **Towards an Educational Research Agenda Considering TADs**

While there is a large body of research about TADs in economics and city planning, there is a need for more educational scholarship that considers the problems policies created during the negotiation process, including Tax Allocation Districts. Since TADs and education are interdisciplinary issues, multiple lines of future study are needed in working towards an ecological approach to better understanding and resisting current trends. Here, I offer future research suggestions involving original residents impacted by TADs, geographical effects, and educational impacts.

#### ***TADs, Original Residents, and Displacement***

These results call for further study into the lived experience and resultant geographical and demographic impacts of the BeltLine TAD. While the initial and retrospective discourse primarily positioned original residents as the intended benefactors of the TAD, future research must center their perspectives to understand the policies' impact. Serving as counter-discourse, this line of inquiry should build on previous examinations of Atlanta displacement emanating from public-housing closures (Oakley et al., 2008; Ruel et al., 2013). Resident-focused study should consist of community and participant-led research illuminating the effects of TADs and current practices resisting displacement. This line of research should also include forming a community-led Atlanta TAD watch group working to address the problems created by the BeltLine TAD, other TADs, and tax abatements across the city, such as Team TIF in St Louis (Harris & Metzger, 2018).

#### ***Geography, Race, and Uneven Development***

I want to expand upon the preliminary geographical finding that the BeltLine shifted school enrollment and demographics. To continue geographic analysis, further research drawing

from Census data is needed to understand the full impact of the BeltLine TAD between 2010 and 2020 in terms of residential changes and demographic changes. Since the renegotiation took place between 2013 and 2016, Census data from 2020 will further situate the full scope of demographic shifts. I plan to use the 2020 Census data to create comparative maps using the City of Atlanta Geographic Information System to contextualize the spatial impact of the BeltLine further. This research will address race, gentrification, and uneven development of the city due to the BeltLine TAD and build on previous findings on the BeltLine development (Immergluck, 2009; Immergluck & Balan, 2018). It will be particularly important to track enrollments at schools located near the BeltLine. While I included analysis of schools within half a mile, several more schools sit within a mile. Demographic shifts in these schools will indicate neighborhood gentrification and potential displacement expanding past the TAD's geographic area. Further, the BeltLine adjacent schools currently experiencing significant enrollment declines due to the COVID 19 pandemic may be at risk of closure or takeover by the state (Welsh et al., 2019). Potential closure risks displacing more poor Black students. As guided by critical geographers, (Hogrebe & Tate, 2012), this inquiry should include community-led efforts to document and capture neighborhood change beyond demographic data.

### ***Social Policies and Educational Impact***

Finally, results call for further study into social policies, including housing and urban redevelopment policies that indirectly impact education through shifts in the tax base. This line of research should also include intentional consideration of the intersection of race and affordability in cities. Educational researchers should continue to study the impact of TADs on schools and education. While discussions of the problems created by TADs are increasing in frequency

(Farris & Horbas, 2009; Greenbaum & Landers, 2014; Weber, 2003), this study's findings indicate continued strong support of TADs as useful economic development policies.

Further, there is a need for examination of the relationship between quasi-public entities and education. The increasing use of these arrangements in cities, particularly around economic development, poses a threat to traditional means of democratic participation. Similar to the way charter school boards are appointed and safeguarded from the public, quasi-public entities operate with increased autonomy.

### ***Social Network of the BeltLine's Policy Sponsors***

Originally, I planned to include social network analysis to show the relationships among policymakers and entities according to media discourse. While I did not include this analysis in the dissertation, the findings I presented here support a need for continued examination. Further investigation into the policy sponsors and policy network undergirding the project will further contextualize the social practices around neoliberal policies impacting education. The policy sponsors behind the BeltLine TAD are particularly important for several reasons. First, the same philanthropist, Greg Gironelli, sponsored both the BeltLine and founded a new charter school operator (Purpose Built Schools). As I discussed in Chapter 2, Purpose Built Schools won a contract from APS to manage four schools, three of which sit along the BeltLine. Gironelli and organizations with which he is affiliated, Purpose Built Communities and The Cousins Foundation, Inc. also sponsored AHA policies for privately developed, mixed-income housing. Second, the BeltLine was mentioned several times as a "model." Examining the discourse used about BeltLine TAD for "policy transfer" (Ball, 2012) will contribute to the literature on the policy exportation process, which would hopefully revealed modes that can be resisted.

Further study into the policy sponsors and social networks entangled with the BeltLine TAD will contribute to scholarship theorizing Atlanta politics, particularly within the realm of neoliberalism. Policymakers interviewed shared concerns of problems emanating from neoliberal policies, namely displacement, gentrification, and affordability. I hope to expand upon the interviews I conducted as part of this dissertation to further theorize the negotiation process, particularly the intersection of publicly elected officials and members of the business community representing the Atlanta Coalition (Stone, 2005). Considering the racial identity and perspectives brought to negotiations is also important and in need of updated analysis as related to the Belt-Line TAD. This is particularly important considering the increasing income inequality in Atlanta (Foster & Lu, 2018) and deeply concerning low rates of upward mobility (Leonhardt, 2013).

### ***The Role of the Media in Neoliberal Educational Policy***

Through using news articles as data sources, I positioned the media as a central component to understanding discourse around neoliberal educational policy. While I examined articles for dominant themes in the discourse around the BeltLine TAD renegotiation, there is significant need for further study of how the media influences or reflects thought about neoliberal policy in education. While studies have considered newspaper discourse around neoliberal educational policy such as value-added policy proposals in Los Angeles (Gabriel & Lester, 2013), coverage of school closures in Chicago (Bierbaum, 2018), or discussion of charter schools in Atlanta (Hankins & Martin, 2006), there is a need for analysis of media coverage of TADs specifically from an educational policy lens. Further, more consideration is needed on the continually evolving issue of ownership of media sources from a social network and policy sponsor perspective.

This relationship is seen in the entanglement of ownership of Atlanta's most read newspaper source, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and sponsorship of the BeltLine TAD.

### ***Methodological Considerations***

While the multifaceted research agenda I described above will require unique research designs, I contend that study findings support maintaining elements of critical discourse studies (CDS) and critical policies studies (CPS) working in tandem (Bacchi, 2009; Fairclough, 2013a). Further a combination of CDS and CPS offers the lens necessary to study policy issues, such as that BeltLine, that transcend disciplinary bonds. Augmented with critical geographic methods (Hogrebe & Tate, 2012), this approach offers promise in illuminating social practices impacting city residents and their schools.

Metaphor analysis (Kitis & Milapides, 1997; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Ng, 2018) also poses promise for considering educational policies. While I considered metaphors within the textual analysis phase of Fairclough's three-tiered approach, metaphor analysis as a stand-alone approach can isolate how neoliberal policies are conceived. Findings emanating from these methodological approaches will be well-positioned towards implications (attitudes, practices, policies, etc.) which resist neoliberal ordering.

### **Conclusion**

A few years ago, while driving along the BeltLine's Southside trail, I saw a building spray-painted with the statement, "The odds are never in our favor" and took the photograph depicted in Figure 6.



**Figure 6**

*Photograph of building on Beltline's Southside Trail*



The phrase painted on this building along the BeltLine is an allusion to the popular book and film series *The Hunger Games*. In this dystopian young adult series, teens are pitted against each other for survival in fight-to-the death competitions. A repeated refrain throughout the series is “May the odds be ever in your favor.” However, upon understanding the dilemma surrounding the circumstances of the games, one realizes that the odds are in fact, never in anyone’s favor.

The juxtaposition of this refrain written on a building along the BeltLine holds significance when considering who benefits from the development and how the project can continue without continued displacement. Even though discourse about the BeltLine often centers on affordability and improve economic outcomes for all, it seems that displacement will continue (Immergluck & Balan, 2018). Geographically, the Southside Trail lies in an area of Atlanta physically and economically separated from concentrated wealth in the northern part of the city. With the statement depicted in the photograph (see Figure 6), the Southside's response illustrates the layered reality that typically the odds favor those currently holding power, including privileged real-estate developers and investors, instead of current residents enduring systemic disinvestment. This image inspired the metaphor of "the odds" that I used to group the findings and captures the main issues related to the BeltLine TAD as a policy characteristic of things that are uneven. Further, the sentiment represents the exploitive impact of neoliberal redevelopment policies on communities and their schools.

Systems of power primarily control the odds, in which those holding the most wealth and social status implement social structures, policies, and procedures to maintain power. In the case of the BeltLine TAD, media and interview discourse and demographic shifts reflect a policy issue fraught with unevenness. Discursive framing captured the uneven nature of the project geographically, socially, and politically. It is well-established that social policies directly impact education. Ultimately, current neoliberal market-based strategies to revitalize underserved communities fail to deliver real change for existing residents. This failure is due to putting money into circulation for accumulation instead of focusing on improving the economic conditions for residents of municipality-neglected neighborhoods. Guided by critical theories and methodologies,

this work did not seek to define, answer, or explain objectively. Instead, it aimed to engage in questioning to understand better and describe changes in social practices around discourse used to frame and publicly negotiate policies affecting education. While this engagement did not provide a linear solution to the Atlanta BeltLine TAD's policy issues, it does offer potential paths forward. While neoliberalism is deeply rooted physically, structurally, and ideologically, discourse serves as a necessary mode to counter dominant discursive frames legitimating market-based policies.

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## APPENDIX

### Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

#### **Perspectives on Renegotiating the TAD**

1. What was your involvement with the Beltline TAD renegotiation?
2. What were your thoughts about renegotiating this TAD? Why was it important to you that the TAD was renegotiated?
  - What specific parts of the TAD did you want renegotiated and why?
  - Why did you think this was a good solution?
3. Who did you work with regarding the renegotiation? What were these experiences like for you?
4. What impact did the Beltline have on the school system? What impact did the Beltline have on the city?

#### **Media Coverage & Communicating with the Public**

5. In what ways did you interact with the media during the renegotiation?
6. What do you think about the media's coverage of the renegotiation?
7. Who were the main stakeholders impacted by the TAD?
  - What did these stakeholders understand about the renegotiation? Why?
  - What did they not understand? Why?
8. How did you communicate with the public about the renegotiation? What did you want the public to know?

#### **Outcomes & Reflections**

9. What was the renegotiated agreement? How did you feel about this agreement at the time? Now?
10. What impact does the renegotiation have now? Is this what you expected?
11. In thinking back about the renegotiation from 2013 to 2016, what would you have done the same? Differently?

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> I considered interview data “retrospective accounts” because I conducted interviews in 2020 and 2021 about events that took place between 2013 and 2016, four to seven years after the renegotiations ended. It is important to note that interview discourse is retrospective since I considered it alongside discourse produced during the renegotiations (media discourse). Policymakers spoke about what they remembered, however, as guided by the critical theories underpinning the inquiry, I assumed that discourse during interviews was significantly impacted by the current context and micro social-political events that took place between renegotiations and interviews. I wanted to make clear that interview data does not capture the discourse at the time, but rather reflections several years later.

<sup>ii</sup> Reprinted with permission from *Tax allocation district completion assessment* [Map], by HR&A Advisors, Inc., 2017, ([https://www.investatlanta.com/assets/2017\\_tad\\_completion\\_assessment\\_bzwY9Y6.pdf](https://www.investatlanta.com/assets/2017_tad_completion_assessment_bzwY9Y6.pdf)).

<sup>iii</sup> Reprinted with permission from *Atlanta BeltLine tax allocation district* [Map], by Atlanta BeltLine, Inc., 2021, (<https://beltline.org/map/?highlight=map>).

<sup>iv</sup> Timeline based on information from Atlanta BeltLine (2021)

<sup>v</sup> Reprinted with permission from the Trust for Public Land. Alex Garvin & Associates, I. (2004). *The BeltLine emerald necklace: Atlanta's new public realm* [Report]. <https://BeltLine.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Emerald-Necklace-Study1.pdf>