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Neoliberal White Corporate Saviourism in Public Education Outsourcing: A Critical Examination of *Project 11*

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ABSTRACT

Private and corporate interests continue to find new ways to penetrate public K-12 education in Canada, often through the outsourcing of services that are best provided by school-based professionals. In this article, we explore how neoliberal privatization intersects with the discourse of white corporate saviourism through philanthropic non-profit organizations that infiltrate schools under the guise of goodwill and benevolence. Using *Project 11* (a mental health non-profit program largely funded by the organization who owns the Winnipeg Jets) as an example of this phenomenon, we illustrate how such organizations may embed themselves in under-resourced schools —made vulnerable by neoliberal reforms— while simultaneously reaping additional social and economic benefits for their

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involvement. We caution that while programs such as *Project 11* may appear —or indeed be— well intentioned, we must maintain critical vigilance against the creeping of white corporate saviourism into our schools. These programs often personalize deeper structural issues, advance corporate interests, reinforce neoliberal ideologies, diminish the role of educators, and perpetuate whiteness and colonial legacies within public education. The presence of private actors within public schools must be scrutinized for the ways in which they may attempt to reshape education to benefit corporate agendas rather than the public good.

Introduction

In Canadian K-12 education, private and corporate interests continue to find new pathways for infiltrating our schools. Rogers and Grant (2024) offer Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) rhizome metaphor as a way of explaining this complex movement, likening it to a root that grows underground sending up shoots in opportunistic spots, continuing to proliferate even if one shoot is cut off. We have been exploring the rhizomatic ways the outsourcing of mental health resources and funding from Canadian K-12 schools to private (for-profit and not-for-profit) organizations has been rapidly spreading through multiple pathways, some visible and some below ground (see Janzen et al., 2025; Sanni-Anibire et al., 2025). In this article, we focus on the intersection of neoliberal privatization and white corporate saviourism via non-profit philanthropic organizations (in this case, those created by for-profit corporations) and the ways in which they infiltrate schools. These philanthropic organizations often receive additional benefits for this work (e.g., tax incentives, free advertising, halo effect, creating future consumers), all under the guise of "doing good" in schools that are under-resourced due to neoliberal reforms.

We begin with a theoretical articulation of neoliberal white corporate saviourism in public education outsourcing, demonstrating the ways in which the embedding of corporations through charitable arms is an ordinary, rather than extraordinary,

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feature of Canadian K-12 schools. We then illustrate and critique this phenomenon through the case illustration of *Project 11*. Operating under the non-profit, True North Youth Foundation, *Project 11* is largely funded by the True North Sports and Entertainment[1] company and owners of the Winnipeg Jets. The program provides mental health curricula and programming to K-12 teachers in Winnipeg and beyond. Importantly, *Project 11* is just one example of the ways in which non-profit organizations provide outsourced services and contribute to the erosion of schooling as a public good. The aim here is to illustrate the ways in which corporate interests are finding their way into Canadian public schools and to explicate the dangers that this entails.

Neoliberalism and White Corporate Saviourism

Neoliberalism is an assemblage of social and economic policies designed to enhance free-market capitalism. Neoliberal policy reforms reduce government spending on social services, privatize public goods, minimize taxation of the wealthy, and decrease government regulation (Brown, 2015). For public education, this means reconfiguring its aim from that of the common good (i.e., developing caring and critical citizens with shared understandings of and interests in our liberal democracy) to that of human capital development, where students' worth are valued based on their future economic productivity. The effects of neoliberal policy in education construct students as (future and present) consumers and producers rather than citizens, focus on skill development rather than education for

1 True North Sports and Entertainment is a Canadian company based in Winnipeg, Manitoba. They own and run, among other operations, the National Hockey League Winnipeg Jets, Canada Life Center, and the Manitoba Moose. The company also invests in real estate.

participation in public life, and assume students' interests as those of capital generation rather than democratic knowledge and participation (Brown, 2015).

While much has been written about the negative effects of neoliberalism in education (e.g., Blackmore, 2019; Davies & Bansel, 2007; Dei, 2019; Giroux, 2018), we aim to explicate the nexus between neoliberal privatization and white corporate saviourism. The white saviour metaphor, informed by critics of western development (e.g., Escobar, 1992, 2012; Said, 1979; Spivak, 1988), has been used to critique humanitarian efforts whereby those in the global North are positioned as "saving" those in the global South (Cole, 2012). The white saviour metaphor relies on stereotypes that degrade people in the global south while elevating the stature of the "saviours" as being superior, self-sacrificing, and benevolent, reifying tropes of "the white man's burden" while maintaining racist and imperialist constructs of "helping" the racialized "other." White saviour humanitarianism ignores the global policy configurations that created the identified inequities in the first place (e.g., slavery, resource extraction, international monetary policies), all of which are intentionally structured to benefit those in the global North. The priority of the white saviour is that of one's own emotional experience, one which validates privilege and centres sentimentality, enthusiasm and benevolence. As Jefferess (2024) explains, "the savior figures are constructed as 'good White people,' somehow separate from the structures and systems that produce 'misfortune' and 'fortune'" (p. 1218).[2] An extension of the white saviour metaphor is that of white *saviourism* which creates a distinction "between a mentality—a psychological

2 See Jefferess, 2024 for a fulsome accounting of white saviourism and its implications.

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complex—and an orientation [in order] to emphasize the way saviourism is not a personal foible but a discourse that produces relations" (Jefferess, 2021, p. 424). It is the discursive relations that feeds the emergence and increased prevalence of the *white saviour industrial complex* (Cole, 2012), a set of psychological, social, political, and economic conditions—that fulfills an emotional need for (mostly) white people. In this dynamic, enthusiasm, benevolence, and good intentions (of the white saviour) are valued over efficacy and impact while ignoring structural inequalities. Importantly, white saviourism has long been tied to capitalism and corporate interests, whereby "good white saviours" often financially benefit from new markets abroad or having access to the glow of the "halo effect" at home. While Cole (2012) helpfully articulates the white saviour industrial complex and the harms that it engenders in the humanitarian sector, we build on this theorizing by making the connections between white saviourism, neoliberalism, and corporate interests more explicit, identifying white corporate saviourism as having similar negative attributes and effects, but originating from a different context—that is, of the corporation.

As Cole (2012) identifies, whiteness is an underlying feature in the white saviour industrial complex. Because race and racism are organizing features in capitalism's resource and wealth accumulation, racism must be recognized for how it plays into corporate saviourism. Racism, central to slavery and land dispossession, fuelled capitalism, benefited white elites (Bertrand, 2022), and created the social, political and economic inequities that continue to persist. As Toews (2018) explains, "racism naturalizes the socially manufactured attacks and inequalities that capitalism requires, making them seem proper, inevitable, and just" (p. 18). In so doing, both whiteness and capitalism are privileged and naturalized.

While schooling in Canada has always been imbued with colonial and racial capitalist histories (Carleton, 2022; Dei, 2005; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), neoliberalism magnifies the inequalities that are

built into an already inequitable education system, creating space for white corporate saviourism to capitalize on the system's growing need for resources, while conveniently feeding itself. While missing the racial analysis, Verelst et al.'s (2024) extensive literature review of the roles commercial actors play in education helpfully label this role as "edu-saviors," where corporations help fill financial gaps (created by government defunding) by providing books, programs, curricula, and so on. Thus, corporations "take advantage of a growing 'public concern' market, and to help mitigate some very real public relations problems by donning the mantle of corporate social responsibility" (Shaker, 2018, p. 56).

Put together, we see neoliberalism and white corporate saviourism as a discursive structure that enables corporations (overwhelmingly led by white people in positions of power) to do "good" for lesser than "others" (the "poor" and often racialized students who are lacking resources in the defunded public education system). This has the effect of bolstering their own emotional gratification and deriving financial benefit from tax breaks, increased profitability, and enjoying the halo effect of positive public impressions which help to build their consumer base. Weaving these theories of white corporate saviourism with neoliberalism allows us to identify and explicate the increased influence of privatization in public schools, particularly through non-profit entities that are infiltrating public schools under the guise of "doing good."

Literature Review

The decades-long influence of neoliberalism globally and nationally has resulted in consistent defunding of social services and increased political and economic interests in government deregulation and privatization (Winton, 2022). In Canada, the steady erosion of funding for education since the 1980s has resulted in crumbling infrastructure and reduced services. Defunding public institutions is a strategic means through which governments manufacture the crises (Berliner & Biddle, 1996) that create opportunities for "solutions" from the private sector via

funding, public-private partnerships, ed-tech, and standardized testing and test preparation (see: Attick & Boyles, 2016; Boyles, 2009; Bulkley & Burch, 2011; Farhadi & Winton, 2024; Gidney, 2019; Hursh, 2015; Moore et al., 2024; Shaker, 2018; Winton, 2022; Yoon, 2024).

One area of increased corporatization of education is in the outsourcing of curriculum materials, raising concerns from educators and scholars whose questions focus on what and whose knowledge is of most worth, and who decides (Pinar, 2004). The creep of corporate agendas into public school curricula is pervasive and can be influenced by corporations' efforts to shape curricula that prioritize market-friendly approaches and cultivate future workers and consumers (Hursh, 2015; Saltman, 2010, 2016; Savard, 2004; Shaker, 2018; Verelst et al., 2024). This has included the rise of educational and textbook publishers who lobby governments to adopt their products through testing, curriculum standards, and education technology – all of which heighten the homogenization, standardization, and automation of what is considered knowledge (Saltman, 2010, 2016). The engagement of for-profit organizations (and sometimes the non-profit branches of for-profit companies) into the education sector is framed as a practical means to respond to the problem (the crisis of need manufactured in part by defunding), providing corporations with a lucrative and largely untapped market through which they can cultivate their positive public images of being benevolent companies (Hursh, 2015; Shaker, 2018). As Shaker (2018) states, when schools engage corporations, they provide a captive audience whose products they implicitly endorse and for whom they cultivate a lifelong consumer base.

Outsourcing the work of public schools to private organizations is becoming more common (Winton, 2022) and is sometimes called "supply side privatization" (Hentschke & Wohlstetter, 2007). Supply side privatization can include "hard" services like school buses or testing services or "soft" services like textbooks or curricula (Savard, 2004). Sometimes outsourcing makes good sense when

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culturally relevant or community-based grassroots organizations are engaged to provide expertise, mentorship, cultural teachings, land-based learning, or language skills otherwise unavailable in public schools (Janzen et al., 2025). However, in most cases, outsourcing is part of neoliberal reform efforts aimed at the privatization and corporatization of public services that ultimately undermine schooling as a public good (Ball, 2003; Burch, 2021; Hursch, 2015).

While much focus has been given to the role of private companies (like publishers and educational technology corporations), less attention has been given to the role of outsourcing that involves non-profit, philanthropic organizations (Buckley & Burch, 2011). These philanthropic organizations are often founded by extraordinarily wealthy individuals (e.g., the Gates Foundation, Schroeder Foundation) or by private companies (e.g., Calgary Flames Foundation, Indigo Love of Reading Foundation), both receiving tax incentives for their "charitable" work. Scott (2009) calls this phenomenon *venture philanthropy*, highlighting the undue influence of largely white, male, and wealthy individuals invested in entrepreneurism in shaping public education reform, policy, and practices, particularly in communities with poor and racialized students. Scott (2009) highlights the ways in which venture philanthropists typically believe that the market-driven strategies that were part of their financial success can and should be translated to education, often with the idea that they "know better" and can help "save" our schools and students. Unlike private corporations who often hide their involvement in schools, non-profit organizations are often seen as legitimate and respectable, irrespective of their motivations, effectiveness, or impact (Buckley & Burch, 2011).

While Scott (2009) focuses on this form of venture philanthropy in the school reform and charter school movements, we are concerned with the outsourcing of mental health services increasingly occurring in K-12 schools (Janzen et al., 2025; Sanni-Anibire et al., 2025). In a previous critical policy analysis, our team

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discovered that the Manitoba government has recommended or directly funded more than 50 private organizations—siphoning more than 8.9 million dollars of public funds over the last five years to the private sector—that aim to address mental health needs in our schools (Janzen et al., 2025). Our analysis illustrated the ways in which outsourcing mental health services leads to the deprofessionalization of teachers, the self-responsibilization of students and teachers while obfuscating systemic problems, and the endorsement of problematic content (e.g., programs that lack robust and arms-length evidence, that lack transparency about practices and curricula, and that reinforces racist stereotypes).

Examples of Corporate Outsourcing in Canadian Public Schools

While we focus on *Project 11* as an exemplar, it is worth illustrating the range of private charitable foundations, funded by wealthy individuals and corporations that are currently infiltrating Canadian schools. We outline a number of different kinds of charitable groups and their ties to corporate interests to demonstrate the ways in which *Project 11* is not an anomaly, but part of what has become increasingly normalized in Canadian K-12 education. Jefferess (2008, 2021) calls this phenomenon the "cultural politics of benevolence," whereby for-profit and not-for-profit entities are deeply intertwined in public services in ways that produce a halo effect. By funding charitable work in public schools, corporations can be perceived as contributing to the public good, while they promote their corporate brand and image, receive tax benefits for their contributions, and/or peddle their values, philosophies, and products in ways that build a future consumer base (Jefferess, 2012, 2021). Viewed through the theoretical lens of neoliberalism and white corporate saviourism, this form of outsourcing solidifies some corporations and individuals as *good*, regardless of the harm they might cause or the conflicts of interest that arise.

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Noteworthy are the Canadian financial institutions and banks (e.g., CIBC, Royal Bank of Canada, TD Bank Group) that offer financial literacy programs, webinars, and downloadable resources and curriculum for K-12 teachers to use in the classroom and that include resources for teaching about budgeting, e-transfers and credit cards, and how to be an entrepreneur. For example, developed by CIBC and the Canadian Foundation for Economic Education, "My Money, My Future" offered webinars for schools on financial education and worked with youth to develop resources to teach these financial skills to other youth, before being abruptly discontinued (Canadian Foundation for Economic Education, 2021, 2023). In the program, youth competed to come up with a winning strategy for teaching their peers about financial literacy for cash prizes (Horwood, 2021). In this format, financial institutions are given the opportunity to shape youth's ideas about "good financial practices" in ways that may have the effect of socializing them for financial products sold by CIBC, rather than curriculum being created by independent bodies or teachers that include critiques of our current financial systems and institutions. This specific example also demonstrates the precarious nature of relying on outsourced programming that can be discontinued at any time as CIBC chose to do in 2023 (Canadian Foundation for Economic Education, 2023). As many of these initiatives are rooted in business and marketing priorities, when corporate backed philanthropic organizations fill gaps in our education system, schools are left vulnerable to an unexpected ending of programs and funding.

Canadian oil and energy companies (e.g., Enbridge Inc., Manitoba Hydro, TC Energy, Cameco Corporation) fund energy, environmental, and science programs in K-12 schools. A recent 2025 report demonstrates that more than 50 oil and gas companies and related industry groups are funding curricula, competitions, conferences, and school activities across Canada that provide "misleading climate change education" (Keary & Chesnut, 2025). For example, Enbridge Inc. owns and operates oil and gas pipelines across Canada and the U.S. They created the Enbridge Public Awareness Program and the Enbridge Gas Energy School Challenge, where

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schools compete to reduce their energy consumption and receive points for completing activities and curriculum to win prizes like Staples gift cards (Marketwired, 2016). Not only do programs like these reflect the energy company's commercial interests, they also focus students' and educators' attention on individual and school energy consumption as a means to protect the environment, while deflecting attention from the oil and gas industries' contributions to environmental degradation and the climate crisis. These kinds "local solutions" are part of the "messaging playbook" of oil and gas corporations who regularly offer fossil-fuel sponsored curriculum and competitions in Canadian schools that seek to individualize the problem of climate change (Keary & Chesnut, 2025; Labbé, 2025).

Many Canadian professional sports teams (e.g., Calgary Flames, Toronto Raptors 905, Montreal Canadiens, and Winnipeg Jets/True North Sports and Entertainment) fund non-profit organizations that build K-12 curricula that centre their sport or offer field trips to watch a game, both working to build future consumers. For example, the Montreal Canadiens Children's Foundation offers a free hockey-themed curriculum for grades 1–9 called Canadiens@School, providing 300 lesson plans that use hockey-related examples to teach Quebec's MELSQ curriculum and incentivize teachers and students by offering Montreal Canadiens' related prizes (Canadiens@School, 2025). Their School Toolkit and curriculum include the use of specific players and mascots teaching lessons about rule-following, leadership, and recycling through hockey narratives depicted in flippable eBooks and activity booklets, providing marketing opportunities for the Canadiens to children and, by extension, their teachers and parents (Canadiens@School, 2025).

Some big box stores (e.g., Amazon Canada, Loblaw Companies Limited, and Canadian Tire) offer worksheets, activities, and curriculum slides for teachers to use in the classroom. For example, Loblaw Companies Ltd. has a charitable foundation called President's Choice Children's Charity that runs the Power Full

Kids at School™ program that offers both meals and snacks alongside activities for children related to nutrition and cooking. Importantly, the charity funds only part of the cost of the food ($0.20 per child per day towards the cost of food up to a maximum of $15,000 per school), while schools pay the rest. In order for schools to receive this funding, they are required to deliver the Power Full Kids | Eat Well program 4 days a week to the entire school's population and schools must publicize their participation in the program (President's Choice Children's Charity, 2025), thus providing free advertisement for the President's Choice brand and Loblaw corporations.

Countless wealthy individuals and families have created foundations that influence public education, including funding programs for food, the arts, mental health, and play oriented activities (e.g., Schroeder Foundation, Max Bell Foundation, and The Trottier Family Foundation). Importantly, when these individual and family foundations fund programs or resources that ought to be funded by the state, it can result in individuals' expectation of influence over what should be publicly determined school-related policies and decision-making. For example, the Schroeder Foundation, founded by Walter and Maria Schroeder, has provided millions of dollars to subsidize meal and milk programs, an entertainment arts program, and scholarships for graduating high school students, claiming that their focus is on ensuring "equitable opportunities... and student well-being" (The Schroeder Foundation, n.d.). However, as reported by the local press, after the Winnipeg School Division voted to end the program that funded police in schools, Walter Schroeder offered to pay to partially reinstate uniformed officers in schools (Macintosh, 2022). In this same article, sources report that Schroeder has "a track record of making unreasonable demands about timelines tied to projects and insisting on being involved in hiring and other decisions typically made by senior division management" (Macintosh, 2022). This demonstrates the dangers of unelected individuals (who are not educators) funding school programs and the potential for undue influence on educational decisions.

There are also a variety of other private organizations funding social science and history curriculum activities, mental health awareness programs, and programming related to volunteerism (e.g., Bell Mts, Canadian Pacific Railway, Cisco Canada, ME to WE). Unlike the previous examples where wealthy individuals or for-profit corporations create a charitable foundation, in the example of WE Charity and ME to WE, a charitable organization grew to create a for-profit independent company founded by the same individuals, and increasingly built charity-corporate relationships, paid large sums to celebrities for speaking engagements, and sold services and products. In his analysis of the WE Charity (a non-profit formerly known as Free the Children) and ME to WE (a for-profit "social enterprise") both started by the Kielburger brothers, Jefferes (2008, 2012, 2021) outlines the ways money flows back and forth between the charitable and for-profit domains. For instance, millions of federal and provincial funds were spent for the development of public-school curriculum and a WE Day style celebration of Canada 150. Previous curricula created by the We Charity required schools to buy books published by the same organization. These books and curricula, however, served as recruitment and fundraising tools for the for-profit "social enterprise" where youth purchased products and services (e.g., travel experiences, leadership training, and branded bracelets). During WE Day events, politicians, celebrities, corporations, and media partners provided sponsorship, gave inspirational talks, and/or provided logistical support, providing them with the halo effect of being associated with We Charity (Jefferess, 2021). Adding to the dubious relationship between public schools and these organizations, the overarching narrative of both WE Charity and ME to WE emphasized paternalistic and white saviour discourse about "freeing children" largely situated in Africa and the global south, while reinforcing white saviourism.

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Case Illustration: The True North Youth Foundation and Project 11

To explicate the discursive ways in which neoliberal and white corporate saviourism circulates, we will focus on *Project 11*, a program designed to offer mental health resources to schools. *Project 11* is a program run through the non-profit, True North Youth Foundation (TNYF), which is funded largely by the True North Sports & Entertainment (TNSE) which owns the Winnipeg Jets. TNSE, founded in Winnipeg in 1996 by Mark Chipman, returned the National Hockey League and the Winnipeg Jets to the city in 2011—to acclaim from the local community—and owns and operates the hockey arena in downtown Winnipeg (formerly the MTS Centre, now known as the Canada Life Centre). Since its founding, TNSE has grown into a massive organization in the city and now includes True North Real Estate Development (e.g., True North Square – a 400-million-dollar mixed-use development with commercial, residential rental, and hotel spaces), the Burton Cummings Theatre, TN Touring (a mobile entertainment system), and other ventures.

TNSE is often lauded by politicians, businesses, and members of the public for returning the Jets to the city, helping to revitalize Winnipeg, and their charitable works. This largely positive reputation is so strong that critiquing their presence and practices is often seen as sacrilegious. This glowing reputation allows for private corporate interests to be literally and metaphorically positioned as the heart of the city, shifting focus away from people's right to the city (Brenner et al., 2009; Fernandez & MacKinnon, 2019). In his book *Stolen City*, Owen Towes (2018) explains the role of the TNSE in the modern manifestation of racial capitalism and settler colonialism in Winnipeg, tracing how the MTS Centre was a private-public partnership built with the Chipman family, using 40 million dollars of public money. This investment was part of the broader efforts of CentreVenture Developmental Corporation—an arms-length agency of the City of Winnipeg focused on downtown economic development—that pushed for the creation of a

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Sports, Hospitality and Entertainment District (SHED) in the middle of the downtown area around the MTS Centre. This effort was designed to attract real estate developers and resulted in the closing and displacing of businesses, hotels, and establishments that predominantly served low-income and Indigenous populations. Towes (2018) describes the work of the TSNE and the SHED as an example of racial apartheid geography that imagines areas of the city to be "a bastion of whiteness," where "Indigeneity was not to be tolerated" (p. 255).

The Impetus for Project 11

The non-profit arm of TNSE, the True North Youth Foundation (TNYF), formerly known as The Manitoba Moose Yearling Foundation and the Winnipeg Jets True North Foundation, was founded in 1996. Under this charitable umbrella, TNYF runs school-, camp-, and community-based programs that provide mental health, curriculum, hockey, and recreation activities. One of these programs, *Project 11*, began in 2012 in partnership with the Province of Manitoba and Healthy Child Manitoba in memory of a Winnipeg Jets player who died by suicide (Project 11, 2023). *Project 11* offers K-12 programming, curricula, podcasts, training sessions, and special events related to mental health for kids. According to TNYF's 2023–2024 annual report, *Project 11* has trained 3855 educators in, and 4600 outside of Manitoba and provided programming to 96,000 students in Manitoba and 115,500 students in other parts of Canada and the United States, Australia, and South Asia (True North Youth Foundation, 2024). According to the TNYF 2024 annual budget, general administration accounted for 7.5% of net revenue while 776,000 (12%) of the 6.4 million Canadian dollars used for programming was spent on *Project 11* (True North Youth Foundation, 2024). In addition to funding from TNSE and private donations, the Government of Manitoba has directly funded the work of *Project 11*, providing grants of 621,000 (Government of Manitoba, 2021a) and 207,000 dollars (Government of Manitoba, 2021b), both in 2021.

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In memorializing a former player who died by suicide, *Project 11* enlists this tragedy and the accompanying sense of grief and loss to mobilize its benevolent actions. Through this project, those who have the means (in this case, a predominantly white and wealthy hockey corporation) use wealth, influence, and good intentions to fill a perceived gap in schools (in this case, inadequate mental health support for kids), by providing an easy, feel-good solution. Although we believe that *Project 11* comes from the good intentions of those involved and that many of the activities that the TNYF engages in are admirable and important contributions to the community, a critical reading of the *discourses* that circulate in and around *Project 11* reveals the ways in which neoliberalism and white corporate saviourism can infiltrate public schools and the (likely unintended) harm that they can cause.

The Marketing & Influence of White Corporate Saviourism

In the video, *This is Project 11*, the director of *Project 11*, Suzi Friesen, explains that it was created to honour the former player of the Winnipeg Moose and Jets. Against a background of somber music, the director explains that *Project 11* was spawned from this player's "great passion for working with kids on and off the ice" and his desire to "ensure that they wouldn't suffer in silence the way he had" (Project 11, 2023). The video includes obvious elements of saviourism enlisted through good intentions, benevolence, and feel-good enthusiasm.

Good intentions can often drive greater empathetic public response if their target is an already marginalized group—in this case, kids. However, instead of being implemented in after-school organizations, local YMCAs, or other organizations that support kids, *Project 11* seems intentionally targeted at teachers in schools. From a marketing perspective, this is likely no accident, as students are a relatively untapped yet lucrative market (Shaker, 2018) who are being exposed to marketing materials in environments (that is, schools) where their engagement is guaranteed. However, the previous public resistance to corporations being present in schools

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has been eroded due to neoliberalism's constant defunding and resulting cuts to staff and resources. As Shaker (2018) explains,

> This change in public attitudes corresponds with an uptick in both casual and institutional denigration of the public sector and its employees (or at least the unions that represent them), the pervasive fetishization of balanced budgets through spending cuts, and the ongoing naturalization of commercial branding in virtually all facets of daily life (p. 46).

Add this to the largely positive reputation and star power that the True North organization enjoys in Manitoba, and we can see why the ongoing government funding of TNYF and the subsequent positive media coverage goes largely uncriticized. Reflective of white corporate saviourism, the psychological, social, political and economic conditions coalesce (Cole, 2012) to uplift the good intentions of *Project 11* allowing it to be readily—and uncritically—welcomed while also fulfilling an emotional need of the (white) corporate elite, in this case, memorializing a player and "doing good" for kids.

White corporate saviourism's benevolence is valued over efficacy. The benevolence of *Project 11* manifests materially in the curriculum that they have developed. As Friesen (Project 11, 2023) explains in the introductory video, teachers and other professionals developed a curriculum that would promote "a holistic healthy lifestyle," and would teach students to "become more self-aware," "self-reflect," and "foster the building of resiliency." The *Project 11* website offers a collection of resources: Intermissions (videos on music, art, and yoga), Hockey Talks (videos with players talking about wellness topics), Mindful Moments (videos of breathing techniques and visualization strategies by wellness experts), and numerous other feel-good activities. These resources are all freely available on the website, while access to the grade-specific "curriculum" is only available to teachers who register and complete the training session, which is almost two hours long and occurs

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during the school day. All these free resources—benevolently created and provided—are reportedly intended to improve the mental health of students. However, we question the efficacy of these resources and approaches and argue that this benevolence mostly serves a feel-good white corporate saviourism and has the effect of actively recruiting and bolstering the Jets fan base.

While viewing the *Project 11* resource videos, the promotion of the Jets is blatant. For example, in the Sample Intermissions, the teacher is wearing Jets gear, the Jets coach is present and participating, and the three students in the video are being taught to sing "Go Jets Go" (Project 11, 2019a). Other images in the videos on the website are mostly of young people, often smiling and wearing Jet gear, engaged in *Project 11* activities: talking to Jets players, doing *Project 11* worksheets, and taking tips from the Jets mascot. The videos illustrate the joyful permeation of *Project 11* into the schools and the halo effect that becomes the strategic and effective marketing tool—not just for the non-profit foundation, but the Jets' corporation. Consider the headline, "Winnipeg Jets offer hundreds of students support on mental health and stress" (Black & Modjeski, 2024) where the in-school programming of *Project 11* is attributed directly to the actions of the for-profit hockey club. The discourse of the halo effect is mobilized in and through the media and is evident in the numerous positive news stories which has likely facilitated the ongoing funding from the Provincial government—who are also benefiting from this halo's glow.

Although seemingly well-intended and benevolent, white corporate saviourism does not recognize, identify, or challenge the defunding and other neoliberal reforms that have created the need for greater mental health support in schools, nor does it advocate for governments to do more to improve public services and mental health supports for kids. A critical reading of *Project 11* reveals the relationships between neoliberalism (facilitating the defunding of social services), capitalism (resulting in unequal wealth accumulation of corporations and

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corporate elites), and white corporate saviourism (mobilizing self-serving marketing under the guise of benevolence). As central features to white corporate saviourism, *Project 11* enlists good intentions, benevolence, and enthusiasm for the benefit of their corporate funder, ultimately overshadowing the interests of the public good.

The Harms of Outsourcing for Teaching

Another nefarious effect of outsourcing through white corporate savioursim is on teachers and the profession. As previously mentioned, one of the key discourses at work in white corporate saviourism is the benevolence of filling a gap within the public system. This gap, created by the lack of funding and resources in schools, creates conditions in which teachers look elsewhere for support and resources. In this way, private organizations are constituted as reasonable sources of support regardless of their for-profit motivations or the efficacy of their programs (Buckley & Burch, 2011).

When outsourced curriculum and school programming become normalized, it fosters deference to outsourced programs and resources which in turn, fuels an anti-intellectualism of—and within—teaching. Rather than relying on the relational, intellectual, and ethical engagement fundamental to the work of teachers (Phelan & Janzen, 2024), outsourced programs—often a smattering of easy-to-implement activities emboldened by enthusiastic aims that often greatly exceed their claims of efficacy (Sanni-Anibire et al., 2025)—become poor proxies for education. In this era of neoliberal discourses, *learnification* has usurped conversations about content, purpose or relationships in education (Beista, 2009). This has resulted in policy-makers being preoccupied with standardized curriculum, the instrumentalization of teaching, and the surveillance of teachers (Phelan & Janzen, 2024). The effects of these policies and their constitutive effects on teachers and teaching foster a distrust for teachers and their professional

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judgment (Clarke & Phelan, 2017). When teachers become so heavily instrumentalized and scrutinized, the professional judgment of teachers is distrusted and the outsourcing of programs becomes normalized. It is a means through which the teaching profession—and indeed, education itself—becomes akin to training, implying that teaching can be controlled and mastered (Heimans et al., 2024). This ultimately fosters an anti-intellectualism in teaching, where educational discourses become exempt from greater questions of purpose, context, and relationship (Biesta 2009) and where teaching is no longer oriented around the relational, intellectual, or ethical engagements of teachers (Phelan & Janzen, 2024).

Due to defunding and ongoing teacher distrust, public schools have become increasingly difficult, often miserable, places to work (Phelan & Janzen, 2024). The narrative and the reality of the difficulty of teachers' work, alongside the growing presence of private organizations arriving on scene to provide "solutions," creates the conditions through which teachers can be enticed—and willingly recruited—to work for private organizations. This is not to suggest that there is a neat division between teachers and corporate actors; rather we want to underscore the ways in which neoliberalism encourages these two groups to be intertwined with one another (Verelst et al., 2024). This has previously been conceptualized as "teacherpreneurship," whereby teachers are increasingly interdependent with the commercial market in a variety of ways both within and outside of schools themselves (Roundy, 2022). In the case of *Project 11*, the Director of Education for *Project 11* was once a teacher, and the list of Program Specialists includes four teachers, all of whom are currently working for and/or endorsing *Project 11*. This discursive normalization and structural formation that entices professionals away from our public schools actively undermines the public system while bolstering the resources and the legitimacy of private organizations. Instead of outsourcing programs to corporations that then entice teachers to their boardrooms, governments should robustly fund public education and create conditions so that

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schools are satisfying places to work and are filled with the professionals required to support children's education and care.

When we use "curriculum" made by corporations, we inevitably agree to the influence of the priorities and prerogatives of the corporation over those of the public. This is a dangerous deal to make. Across Canada, curricula—although contested, as issues of public education necessarily are—are intended to reflect national and regional interests, legislation, rights, and values. For example, curricula across Canada have long integrated the values of and teach about the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and more recently, are being revised to better teach about the historical injustices of Indigenous peoples (Miles, 2021). However, the influence of neoliberalism and corporate ideologies can destabilize the content and purpose of the curriculum, reorienting it from a representation of shared public values to that of a tool of corporate agenda. For example, in the blatant coalescence of the oil and gas industry with the right-wing United Conservative Party in Alberta, the government reformed the curriculum in 2021, and was criticized for their erasure of the ecological crisis, its causes or effects (Seidel et al., 2024), as well as for how it "minimizes the impact of [residential] schools and their harmful reach in the Canadian colonial context" (Donald, 2020). Corporations and corporate saviourism are not required to answer to an ethical responsibility for historical redress, factual accuracy, inclusion, or social justice; nor are they required to ensure the efficacy of their programs and prevent negative outcomes of them. In contrast, educational curriculum that is truly public in nature can be held accountable through democratic measures like parent and community curriculum review committees, co-creating curricula with students, and ensuring that groups who have experienced marginalization serve as content experts or reviewers. The danger of neoliberal white corporate saviourism influencing or creating curriculum means that the will of the corporation is served rather than the greater good of the public. Because capitalism relies on racism and colonialism and

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because it holds no favour for justice and equity, the curriculum that corporations produce will (even if inadvertently) reflect or endorse these underlying tenets.

The Harms of Outsourcing on Conceptions of Mental Health

From the main landing page of *Project 11*'s website, the program is described as focusing on mental health and uses language to describe the program including: "Supporting conversations about their mental health: With activities to deepen understanding about how to be well;" "Providing opportunities to develop coping strategies: With a variety of wellness practices to explore;" and "Educating students about mental wellness" (Project 11, n.d.-a). As mentioned, the website is filled with sample curricula, resources, podcast episodes, videos, and activities geared towards youth. A significant gap when reviewing *Project 11's* named specialists was the lack of mental health professionals with trained expertise. Of the 22 listed specialists, only three appear to have any mental health credentials (all art therapists), and the others include a wide range of individuals that include a radio host, laughing yoga teachers, CrossFit gym owners, Zumba instructors, dieticians, fitness trainers, leadership coaches, and personal trainers (Project 11, n.d.-b).

In the "Experts" section of the resources, a psychiatrist, a counselor, and a physician each provide a few short Intermission videos focused on Dialectical Behavioural Analysis (DBT) exercises, mindfulness activities, emotional literacy, or the importance of getting enough sleep and exercise. However, the website mostly functions as a collection of nifty tips and feel-good activities that promote simplistic and self-responsibilizing views of mental health (e.g., a Self-Care Bingo worksheet and colouring pages featuring the Jets' mascot). Framing mental health support through this lens reflects how neoliberalism has become increasingly adopted in mental health discourse and interventions in ways that focus on things like self-improvement; individualism; being responsible for your own attitude,

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success, and mental wellness (without context of individual or structural experiences of trauma, violence, or oppression); and emotional and behavioural self-regulation (e.g., Adams et al., 2019; Garrett, 2016; Golden, 2017; Maiese, 2022; Mayor, 2019). While it is admirable to try to reduce the stigma around discussing mental health, coping strategies, and suicide, doing something to seem as though you are addressing suicidality or mental health is not the same as doing the right or effective thing (Kutcher et al., 2017).

A large portion of the *Project 11* website features a two-minute video series by Cameron Hughes – a professional sports entertainer and "professional crowd igniter"– (cameronhughes.tv) who speaks to students as part of wellness motivation (Project 11, n.d.-c). The messages in this series include "believe in yourself," "build towards your dreams by being resourceful," "keep pushing that belief button and anything is possible" (Project 11, 2019b), and "people who are successful work hard" (Project 11, 2019c). Not only do these kinds of messages reinforce white neoliberal values of being responsible for yourself and your success regardless of the personal and structural challenges you face, embedding these within a suicide prevention and mental health program has the (unintended) result of minimizing or dismissing the fact that true mental health concerns cannot be overcome simply by working hard or dreaming big. Further, in one video titled "Personal Challenges" (Project 11, 2019d), Hughes discusses his mother's cancer diagnosis and eventual death when he was a teenager. In response to this tragic loss, Hughes tells youth that whatever challenges come in their lives, "We have to take that story, I believe, and allow it to become our fuel. Don't let it own you [...] Use it to help you grow." While we appreciate his personal sharing of loss, this messaging reinforces that if youth struggle to find a silver lining or to thrive after experiencing a trauma or loss, the problem is their attitude, not the experiences they have had. Considering the ways in which some youth disproportionately experience intergenerational and colonial trauma, criminalization, losses connected to the toxic drug supply, evictions, removals from their families, racism,

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sexual and physical abuse, and so on, these kinds of "motivational" mental health videos, no matter how well intentioned, can deepen a child's suffering and isolation because they learn to believe that their *reaction* is the source of their problem. These messages also reflect the prioritization within white saviourism of centering enthusiasm and sentimentality over impact and results.

Similarly, in the short video series "Hockey Talks: Mental Health Awareness," Winnipeg Jets players are interviewed by students and are asked to give tips on managing worries (Project 11, 2024a), coping with tough days (Project 11, 2024b), and mental health (Project 11, 2024c). Their advice is usually focused on individual attitude changes or coping strategies that include things like "having positive self-talk" or to overcome your fears or challenges in life to "have faith, have courage, stay strong" (Project 11, 2024d). Other videos focus on having fun and being happy (Project 11, 2024e). Of note, when these supposed mental-health tips are given by famous Jets players, and not by mental health experts, youth watching the videos may be more likely to assume that the messages are accurate and that the tips should work for them. This is particularly relevant given *Project 11's* emphasis on hockey players and hockey culture, which, while beyond the scope of this article, other scholars have importantly pointed to as being steeped in whiteness and (toxic) masculinity (Fowler et al., 2023).

Reflective of another form of neoliberal and white saviour dynamics is a series of mental health videos called "Mindful Moments." Largely led by a music teacher and a leadership coach, this series includes videos on mindfulness, breathing, and muscle relaxation. Rapidly expanding across corporate and education entities, mindfulness exercises are increasingly framed as a way to reduce stress, increase productivity, and focus on oneself via self-care (Cohen, 2017; Purser & Loy, 2013). Cohen (2017) calls this "neoliberal mindfulness" and Purser and Loy (2013) label it "McMindfulness." Both highlight the ways in which there has been a decoupling of meditation and mindfulness from Buddhist ethical and religious origins and its

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original liberatory purposes, which emphasizes a need to critically reflect on what was at the root of our collective suffering in order to end this suffering. In this secularizing and psychologizing of Buddhist practices, the radical collective imperatives for change are erased in favour of individual focus, which "leaves it wide open to commercial exploitation, assimilation and distortion" (Cohen, 2017, p. 8).

It is also important to discuss notable absences within *Project 11*. Given the paucity of mental health practitioners as specialists, it is perhaps less surprising that we were unable to find any publicly accessible materials on *Project 11*'s website that directly address youth suicidality. None of the provided examples of intermissions, videos, or lesson plans we reviewed ever used the word *suicide*. For a program that began to honour a player who had died by suicide with the hope that no youth will "suffer in silence like he did," we are puzzled by the apparent absence of meaningful and direct conversations about suicide prevention, despite research findings that highlight the importance of direct discussion of suicide (Dazi et al., 2014; Meerwijk et al. 2016). Relatedly, the word *trauma* is rarely, if ever, mentioned in these materials, despite the Canadian Consortium on Child and Youth Trauma's (2024) finding that one third of Canadians have adverse childhood experiences (e.g., physical and sexual abuse, family violence), which can have lifelong mental health impacts. In addition, none of the annual reports (those we were able to access for the years 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024) or website materials suggest that there have been any research studies or program evaluations that measure the efficacy of *Project 11* in reducing youth suicide or improving youth mental health. These absences function to dismiss true mental health issues, the need for professional support and public investment in meaningful research-backed mental health, and suicide prevention support in and out of schools.

Additionally absent are curriculum examples or resources that name any structural roots of suffering or distress, including poverty, colonialism, racism, food

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insecurity, community safety, affordable housing, access to clean water, and so on. Given the abundance of literature that connects experiences of structural oppression and discrimination with mental health distress (e.g., English et al., 2018; Mitchell, 2019; Williams et al., 2023; Yoshikawa et al., 2012), this absence reflects the white corporate roots of much of *Project 11* and elides many of the real conversations and changes that need to happen in Manitoba if we are genuinely committed to preventing youth suicide and improving outcomes. Scholars have long argued that suicide prevention measures must be rooted in systemic change coupled with land-based and culturally relevant supports in order to make meaningful improvements for Indigenous youth (e.g., Barker et al., 2017; Turner, 2014). Turner (2014) specifically argued that Indigenous youth suicide prevention must be directly focused on addressing the ongoing harms of colonialism and increasing Indigenous sovereignty, culture, and languages. Despite this, aside from a land acknowledgement, a few videos with links to Indigenous people reading Indigenous children's books, and a sample Indigenous dance "Intermission" video, Indigenous people, culturally specific teachings or techniques, and the impacts of colonialism are markedly absent from the *Project 11* materials. These absences not only unwittingly contribute to Indigenous erasure and whiteness but also function to draw attention away from the social and structural inequalities that many students face as the root cause of mental health distress and reflect the values inherent in white corporate saviourism.

Conclusion

In this critical reading of *Project 11,* we aim to illustrate the negative effects of neoliberalism and white corporate saviourism in schools. We argue that this kind of outsourcing is a risk to our liberal democracy by undercutting the public system in favour of corporate interests. Our claims that benevolent organizations are eroding public education are part of the larger neoliberal rhizome proliferating in all directions, burrowing away at the foundation of public education. *Project 11* is a single example that highlights how philanthropic organizations tied to private

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wealth are one root of this larger problem. Privatization does not happen all at once, rather it is a process whereby the public sector is gradually dismantled and replaced by the private sector (Winchip et al., 2023). And to be clear, a fully privatized public education system is the end game—the overt intention of neoliberal policy reform which can be seen in the current American context where education is being actively dismantled (Janzen & Laidlaw, 2025). Regardless of the good intentions of *Project 11*, the enjoyable and seemingly harmless opportunities for students, or the perceived helpful support provided to teachers, we must remain vigilant about the creeping of white corporate saviourism into our schools. We must carefully examine any infiltration of private organizations into public schools, watching for the ways in which corporate interests and influence reinforce neoliberal messages, erase structural injustices, build future consumers, undercut the value and role of teachers and other educators, and reify whiteness and the colonial project. We need to reinvigorate—and constantly recentre—conversations about the purpose of public education and how that purpose is realized. Public funding and public oversight must ensure that public education indeed serves the public—not the corporate—good.

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