

A Special 72-page Issue on the Battle in U.S. Public Schools

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Testing & Social Studies in Capitalist Schooling

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The Opt Out Revolt

By John Bellamy Foster

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In the United States today, the age of monopoly-finance capital and neoliberal politics, all aspects of social life are being financialized at breakneck speed, while the economy as a whole and employment remain lackluster. Financial flows of whatever kind are converted into “securitized” assets to be leveraged by Wall Street speculators. The data of private communications are mined. Health care is converted into a realm of super profits. Public water and electric facilities are sold to the highest bidder. The political system is turned into an open-air auction. Even pollution is treated as a market.

At the center of this juggernaut is elementary and secondary education, which receives over \$550 billion in annual public spending, equal to the GDP of Belgium, ranked twenty-fifth worldwide in national income.¹ The new copyrighted Common Core State Standards, and the accompanying standardized tests run by two multi-state consortia in conjunction with testing companies, are “high stakes” not merely for schools, teachers, and students, but also for the vested interests of capital. The latter seek by these means to: (1) form a labor force of cheerful robots; (2) eliminate critical thinking from schools; (3) generate immense profits for the education industry and information firms; (4) end teacher tenure, seize control of classrooms from professional educators, and break teachers’ unions; (5) privatize public education through charter schools and other means; (6) facilitate private profits and financial speculation through control of government education funding; (7) merge education for large sections of the poor and racial minorities with the military and penal systems; (8) decrease the role of democracy in education while increasing the corporate role; (9) create databases with detailed biometrics on almost everyone, to be exploited by corporations; and (10) manage the population in what is a potentially fractious society divided by race and class.

Such unstated systemic aims – even more than the stated goals of closing the achievement gap associated with racial and ethnic inequality, or increasing international competitiveness – serve to explain the vast restructuring of U.S. education pushed forward during the last decade and a half, from the Bush

administration's No Child Left Behind Act to the Obama administration's Race to the Top.

The entire educational reform movement, as it is called, has been spearheaded by a number of big "venture philanthropic" or "philanthrocapitalist" foundations, including the Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation, the Walton Foundation, and others, which have sought to promote the Common Core State Standards, high-stakes standardized tests, and charter schools. These foundations have poured billions into educational restructuring, with the cooperation of large corporations and the government at every level.²

However, what could be called the national command center of this corporate-based education reform movement is located in the quasi-governmental agencies of the Council of Chief State Officers (CCSO) and the National Governors Association (NGA), both consisting of governmental officials but functioning outside political jurisdictions as private, non-governmental organizations, unaccountable to the populace. The CCSO and the NGA have copyrighted the Common Core State Standards, which were paid for primarily by the Gates Foundation and designed in conjunction with educational services companies like Pearson and McGraw-Hill – and without the significant involvement of teachers. As a result neither the federal government nor the states nor the teaching profession itself have control of the Common Core, which is nonetheless imposed on states and local school districts, forming the foundation of the entire system of high-stakes standardized testing.³ The performance of students on the high-stakes standardized tests is currently being used in thirty-five states to evaluate teachers, in many cases firing those educators whose students do not provide sufficient evidence of teacher "value added."⁴

There is no doubt that the U.S. public education system is full of inefficiencies and inequities. Huge inequalities exist in the funding of schools in different states, in different school districts within the same state, and even among schools within the same district. At Mission High School in San Francisco, \$9,780 is spent on each student, while at schools in Palo Alto, a wealthy enclave home to Stanford, located just 30 miles away, the amount spent per student is \$14,995.⁵

A national survey of fourteen large school districts discovered that students from third through eighth grade took ten standardized tests each year on average, with some taking as many as twenty tests in a year. From third to fifth grades, students in urban communities spend 80 percent more time on

test-taking than their suburban counterparts; from sixth to eighth grades 73 percent more; and from ninth to twelfth grades 266 percent more. In contrast, European students, whose educational performance is generally higher, are very rarely exposed at this stage to multiple-choice based standardized tests in their national assessments, and instead write essays evaluated by educators.⁶

There is no evidence that the new system of high-stakes standardized tests has served to lessen chronic inequalities. In the 1970s to early 1980s the white-black and white-Latino achievement gaps narrowed sharply, with black and Latino students gaining relative to their white student peers. However, this closing of the gap has since slowed dramatically, especially in the decade and a half since No Child Left Behind was introduced. At the same time, the income-achievement gap has grown so that it is now 40 percent higher than it was several decades ago.⁷

Indeed, all indicators point to a strong correlation today between educational achievement and class or socioeconomic status. To put this in proper perspective, though, it is first crucial to recognize that since in the United States minorities are disproportionately working class and poor, lower socioeconomic status overlaps significantly with racial and ethnic inequality, increasing the likelihood that a low-income child will come from a negatively stereotyped and culturally oppressed group, thereby placing further barriers in the way of educational achievement. The central problem confronting the school system is therefore the basic conditions of life endured by students attending public schools, a reflection of the larger capitalist society and its class and racial oppressions.

In 2013, for the first time in recent history, a majority of the students in U.S. public schools came from families designated as in poverty or “near-poverty.” As recently as 1989, the share of low-income students in public schools was less than 32 percent. It has climbed ever since, to 38 percent in 2000, 48 percent in 2011, and 51 percent in 2013. In Mississippi the portion of low-income students in public elementary and secondary schools is 71 percent, and in New Mexico 68 percent, while in New York it is 48 percent, and in a largely white state with a sizeable rural population like Oregon, 49 percent. In 40 of the 50 states as well as the District of Columbia, more than 40 percent of the public school students are classified as low-income. This means that not only are Pre-Kindergarten to twelfth grade (PK-12) students in U.S. public schools mainly working class, by any measure, but they also come predominantly from the working and non-working poor. (A key element in

the class structure of U.S. education is that almost a quarter of all PK-12 schools in the United States are private schools [here private does not include charter schools which are publically funded but privately managed], serving over five million mostly wealthier, primarily white students. Enrollees in private PK-12 schools in the United States represent about 10 percent of the total national elementary and secondary school population.)⁸

Rather than seeking to address these deepening class and race inequalities—and the nature of U.S. society itself—the supposed answer to the crisis of education advanced by the new corporate-education juggernaut has been the privatization of the entire system. The result is an educational system increasingly controlled by firms at the apex of monopoly-finance capital, promoting high profits and a packaged curriculum designed to habituate future workers to the firms' own needs. Such a model can only exacerbate economic and social inequality. Those students who seem less integrated into the system, primarily the most underprivileged minority students, are to be shunted off to the military and penal systems—a reality already apparent in some large urban centers.⁹ Schools across the country deemed “failures” due to low standardized test scores, mostly in poor and minority communities, are being closed, their teachers fired, and the educational system in those areas increasingly given over to charter schools. The main victims of this educational restructuring have of course been those most vulnerable.

For all of its deficiencies, including a long history of racial segregation, the U.S. education system has been the site periodically of populist and progressive movements driven by teachers, parents, and communities—a struggle memorialized by John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Education of Black People*, and Grace Lee Boggs's “Education: The Great Obsession.”¹⁰ At various points in the twentieth century, attempts by vested interests to bring the school system under the regime of scientific management and monopoly capital were beaten back, by mass popular resistance aimed at defending a degree of local and parental control of schools.¹¹ Public schools have generally been viewed as central to communities, and constitute one of the few places where the inequities of society can be addressed and partially ameliorated, given dedicated, critical teachers and adequate funding—although it is impossible for the schools themselves to transcend the broader societal contradictions and their effects on children.

The latest establishment attempt to use the Common Core and high-stakes standardized tests as a means of breaking down and restructuring the entire

education system has once again met with a massive popular revolt—a vast fire burning in the opposite direction, in the form of a rapidly growing Opt Out movement in school districts and states across the country. In New York State in 2015, over 200,000 students—a full 20 percent of designated test takers—were opted out by their parents from standardized testing in English or math or both, quadruple the number from the previous year. Opting out was substantial in some of those districts in New York with preponderantly black and Latino populations, contradicting the notion that the movement was simply based in the white upper middle class. At the predominantly black Garfield High School in Seattle in 2013, the staff refused to administer the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test, and were supported by parents and students in a mass Opt Out revolt. All across the country, the Opt Out movement has taken the form of a populist groundswell—on both the left and right—as more than a million parents have had their children opted out from the standardized tests. In December 2015, the U.S. Department of Education sent letters to twelve states warning them that they were violating federal law with their low test participation rates. Fighting back, Oregon passed a law requiring that school districts notify parents of their right to opt their students out of the standardized testing for any reason.¹²

Although there have been attempts in the media to portray Opt Out as a movement primarily of privileged, white suburban families, the class and race demographics of the schools largely belie this image. If black and Latino communities are more likely to be struggling over actual school closures—with their community schools designated “failures” because of weak test scores—rather than organizing around opting out from the standardized tests themselves, it simply means that they are facing conditions that are considerably worse, and the struggle is consequently taking a different form. Moreover, there are now signs of a wide class and race alliance emerging against high-stakes standardized tests and the privatization of education, in which communities of color are playing larger roles. As Gerald Hankerson, president of the Seattle-King County NAACP, declared last year, “The Opt Out movement is a vital component of the Black Lives Matter movement and other struggles for social justice in our region. Using standardized tests to label Black people and immigrants ‘lesser,’ while systematically underfunding their schools has a long and ugly history in this country.”¹³ In early January 2016, a BK Nation Forum on Testing and the Opt Out movement was held in Manhattan.¹⁴ Of those attending, around 70 percent were people of color, and the majority were African American. Over half were under 40 years of age. As Fordham professor of African American Studies and

education activist Mark Naison, one of the founders of the Badass Teachers organization, wrote, the gathering represented a “powerful challenge to education policy makers who claim testing is a civil rights issue and that the Opt Out movement is strictly a white middle class initiative.” He continued,

Parent after parent, teacher after teacher, administrator after administrator spoke eloquently about how excessive testing and culturally insensitive curricula were making students in their communities hate school. Equally harrowing were stories about how excessive scripting and humiliating visits [to classrooms] were making the best teachers in high poverty communities leave their jobs. What came across loud and clear was that a climate of fear emanating from city, state and federal policies, especially school closings and receivership, was creating a toxic atmosphere in Black and Latino Communities.¹⁵

In December 2015 the federal government, faced with increasing criticism and a national Opt Out movement that threatened to emerge as a tidal wave in 2016, rid the country of No Child Left Behind and replaced it with the 1,061-page Every Student Succeeds Act. The new law’s main change was the federal government’s move to turn over more authority for running high-stakes assessments to the states. Nevertheless, it mandates as before that such tests be imposed annually on all students from grades three through eight, requiring 95 percent student participation in the testing. Moreover, the Every Student Succeeds Act clearly presumes that real control of the Common Core State Standards, and hence the standardized tests themselves, will remain primarily in private hands: the Council of Chief State Officials, the National Governors’ Association, educational service companies such as Pearson and McGraw-Hill, and the big venture capitalist foundations that provide funding and direction. All of this means that the Opt Out struggle will continue, but will be fought out in shifting terrains from state to state.¹⁶

Meanwhile, teachers in many parts of the country are struggling to protect a viable education, their students’ futures, and their own jobs. On January 25, 2016, Detroit teachers closed 64 out of around a hundred public schools in the city with a massive “sick-out.” Their demands in a nutshell: Democracy and Education.

Notes

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3. Mercedes K. Schneider, *The Common Core Dilemma: Who Owns Our Schools?* (New York: Teachers' College Press, 2015), 128-39.
4. Kristin Rizga, "Sorry, I'm Not Taking This Test," *Mother Jones*, August 2015, <http://motherjones.com>.
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7. "Racial and Ethnic Achievement Gaps," Stanford Educational Opportunity Monitoring Project, <http://cepa.stanford.edu>; Rizga, "Sorry, I'm Not Taking This Test"; Sean F. Reardon, "The Widening Income Achievement Gap," *Educational Leadership* 70, no. 8 (2013): 10-16, <http://ascd.org>; Ravitch, *Reign of Error*, 55-62.
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9. See Erica R. Meiners and Therese Quinn, "Militarism and Education Normal," *Monthly Review* 63, no. 3 (July-August 2011): 77-86.
10. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916); W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Education of Black People* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973); Grace Lee Boggs, "Education: The Great Obsession," *Monthly Review* 22, no. 4 (September 1970): 18-39.
11. See Foster, "Education and the Structural Crisis of Capital," 9-17.
12. Elizabeth A. Harris, "20% of New York State Students Opted Out of Standardized Tests This Year," *New York Times*, August 12, 2015; Valerie

Strauss, "Why the Movement to Opt Out of Common Core Tests Is a Big Deal," Answer Sheet blog, *Washington Post*, May 3, 2015; David Casalaspi, "Reflections on the Opt-Out Movement's Future," Green and Write blog, Michigan State University, January 19, 2016, <http://edwp.educ.msu.edu/green-and-write>; Jesse Hagopian, "Seattle's Garfield High School Opt Out Movement Scores Huge Victory Over 'Smarter Balanced' Common Core Testing," I Am an Educator blog, April 7, 2015, <http://iamaneducator.com>. The Oregon Department of Education, responsible for instituting the state's new law ensuring the right of parents to opt their children out of standardized tests, has already undermined the clear intent of the law by inserting on the opt-out form the following misleading statement in larger, boldface letters, designed to frighten the parents from opting out their kids: "I understand that by signing this form I may lose valuable information about how well my child is progressing in English Language Arts and Math. In addition, opting out may impact my school districts efforts to equitably distribute resources and support student learning" (Oregon Department of Education, 2015–2016 Opt-Out Form).

13. Hankerson, quoted in Jesse Hagopian, "'Opt out now': The Seattle NAACP Revives the Legacy W.E.B Du Bois, Demands an End to Common Core Testing," I Am an Educator blog, April 10, 2015.
14. "BK" stands for "Building Knowledge." BK Nation is a relatively new national organization based in New York City:<http://bknation.org>.
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