

## **Challenges to Academic Freedom: California Teacher Educators Mobilize To Resist State-Mandated Control of the Curriculum**

**By Roberta Ahlquist**

What kind of vision do we hold for public education? What are the ideal purposes of schooling in a democracy? What kind of citizens do we hope to 'grow' within the context of the American public school system? Do we want a school system that teaches people how to critically think and act, from multiple perspectives, on the world in which we live? Shouldn't we prepare students for future generations? Do we want independent learners, who ask challenging questions and are unsatisfied with simplistic answers? Do we want civically and ethically responsible citizens who care for each other and the fragile world in which we live? These are some of the questions that parents, teachers, and the communities, in which we live and work, need to consider, as policy makers and business interests reshape public school curricula. With the current barrage of standards, we need to think seriously about whether these standards significantly help us accomplish the primary goals and functions of public schooling. The future of public schooling in the U.S.A. is at stake.

The public sector, particularly education, is the last frontier for commodification

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in the U.S.A. Public schools are being reshaped and corporatized, and education at all levels is becoming increasingly more commodified and unequal. Much of this is being done under the guise of accountability. To understand the implications of this major restructuring of public education one needs to look at how big business leadership is consolidating its power, author-

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ity and legitimacy over democracy in schools (Ross, 2000). What little local control that exists is being dismantled, as we watch teachers become de-skilled technicians, driven to teach students content that will appear on the next onslaught of standardized high stakes tests during the school year. These tests will be used to also determine whether teachers are doing a good job — of teaching students to take the tests.

The movement to monitor and control what K-12 teachers teach is not new. It has been ongoing for over the past thirty years (Ahlquist & Hudson, 2002). This movement is escalating around increased curriculum control and mandated standards that teachers need to teach to, and recently it has advanced to higher education, specifically teacher education, in great part because teacher educators are being blamed (along with K-12 teachers) for not doing their jobs (Hardy, 2001). Furthermore, as test scores are compared across the nation and within the state, “teachers are being blamed, and students are being punished” for any drop in standardized scores, without even looking at changing demographics, poverty, and other social conditions (Marker, 2002). It is well known that SAT scores reflect social class background, and can rise up to 100 points based on test preparation courses (<http://www.fairtest.org/univ/2000SAT20scores.html>).

Over the past five years, the state, under the auspices of the Commission for Teacher Credentialing (CTC), the State Board of Education, the Business Roundtable, and the legislature (SB 2042), has built a case to reinstate the monocultural curriculum of the 1950s, by re-imposing a standardized, homogeneous curriculum upon public education (Berlak, 2002). The CTC mandates for teacher education are a corporate-generated model, which fit within the directives of the Master Plan for California education. California’s mandates are being driven by federal corporate-driven standards, in a major overhaul of teacher education from the federal level (See *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge*, 2002). This is a one-size-fits-all, reductionist, teach-to-narrow-required standards, and forget about the complex sociocultural, linguistic, and individual needs of students. Not that standards are not important; baseline standards are necessary. But whose standards, and why so minimalist, degrading, and mainstream? Take a look at what is being cut out of programs, literally reducing some credential programs to a bare-bones core curriculum, teaching primarily to test-proof standards that the state, not the majority of teacher educators claim are most important. Situated pedagogy, that is, teaching a curriculum that is grounded in students’ lived experiences, and that responds to the explicit and multifaceted needs of the particular group of students one teaches, is all but lost in this scenario.

We need to address the contradictions in the form of pleas from state officials for teachers and schools to address the most needy students, in the lowest performing schools; a major priority of California’s vision for schools. This call becomes a hollow gesture at best, if one analyzes the content and standards for K-12 students. The same is true for beginning teachers in higher education. Increasing state and corporate control over kindergarten through higher education curriculum

has implications for academic freedom, social justice, and for advocates of a critical multicultural and equitable approach to the curriculum. Imagine if the state came to science academics, or humanities and arts faculty, and mandated a curriculum which was top-down and driven by narrow business interests. Be careful, it is just around the corner.

These standards pressure teacher educators to prepare teachers to teach to the lowest common denominator, the standardized tests. Teacher educators are aware that the research shows that more individual attention, high expectations for all, smaller classes with culturally relevant curriculum, affirming language and ethnic diversity, contribute to success for all. At the same time teacher educators are being coerced and cowed to standardize and revise their courses, which means less contextualized, dialogical collaboration and interaction. Increasing state and corporate control over kindergarten through higher education curriculum is an academic freedom issue. It is undemocratic to force teachers to swallow these mandates. The message to teacher educators in this mandate is of implicit mistrust of the professionals who have been educated to teach teachers. Furthermore, we are now being asked to do more for less. Class size has increased by 10 to 30 additional students in most teacher credential classes this fall, without even a discussion with faculty about this increased workload. We are told that budget cuts have required this increase. Yet in other colleges on campuses there has been no requirement to increase class size. We have also been asked to put our graduate course offerings on hold. How can teacher educators be expected to maintain a high quality teacher education program under these demoralizing working conditions?

Many teacher educators across the state have responded to these mandates with both fear and loathing. Others are engaging in various forms of passive resistance. A few educators are working on alternative forms of assessment, to undermine the lock-step standardized assessments. Tensions exist as teacher educators try to address the contradictions between programs that are theoretically and practically grounded in transformative pedagogy, in contrast to the linear, mainstream, developmentally defined state standards (Whittaker & Young, 2002). Teacher educators are being told by department chairs and deans that if the college doesn't pass the CTC accreditation of these newly revised programs (revision of which occurs on many campuses as I write), they will have a program, teachers will not be able to become credentialed, we won't be able to address the pressing need for new teachers, and furthermore, if we don't conform and jump through the State's hoops, we'll all be out of jobs (September-October 2002 interviews with teacher educators across the state). Will this really happen? Many think not. One teacher educator, whose program was an 'early adopter' and was approved, told me that on her campus, "CTC seemed to be writing the document (for us to follow) on the fly. . . and the right hand didn't know what the left hand was doing"(Interview, October 2002, Los Angeles).

Meanwhile, what can teacher educators do? What does activism mean to teacher educators? Over the past two weeks I have been talking with California State

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University teacher educators at several meetings (California Council on Teacher Education, and the Delegate Assembly of the California Faculty Association) across the state. Most are demoralized, angry, outraged, and a few have been silenced. Last week I developed and circulated a six-question survey to teacher educators primarily from California State University institutions at these two meetings (See survey attached). Responses to two of the questions about actions people might consider, follow:

Of 52 teacher educators from 10 different universities represented at these meetings, 49 said their attitude towards these major changes was least supportive, # 5. (1-5, with 1 being most supportive, and 5 being least supportive).

Forty-eight respondents out of 52 said they would be willing to challenge these revisions with other teacher educators. This indicates that not all is well with the state of teacher education.

This indicates that not all is well with the state of teacher education. Teacher educators are not happy with the current top-down mandates. Teacher educators have yet to take active leadership to maintain the integrity of our programs. But many of us haven't had a chance to meet, talk, and develop a plan to respond to challenges to our integrity as professionals, as well as our academic freedom. What kind of challenges can teacher educators make?

On October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2002, at the California Council on Teacher Education (CCTE) meeting in San Diego, seven teacher educators in a panel presentation, advocated dialogue and resistance to the top-down mandated CTC standards. I joined others to seek support from the CCTE policy body for a resolution opposing these mandates, put forth by a group of teacher education faculty at San Diego State University (see Rich Gibson's article in this issue). The policy-making body of CCTE made excuses for not taking a position on the resolution. Perhaps they will reconsider. The same day I traveled to the California Faculty Association (CFA) as a delegate to their Delegate Assembly in Los Angeles. After talking with other teacher educators there who were also distressed, angry, and/or demoralized about these mandates, I drafted a resolution that was brought before the Women's Caucus of CFA. The resolution is as follows:

Resolved: That the California Faculty Association support CSU teacher educators who are challenging the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC), the State Board of Education, and the legislatively driven state-mandated curriculum, designed to teach teachers primarily the methods of standardized test taking. This mandate undermines our academic freedom. Further, we oppose the disciplinary actions that are being used to threaten and punish teacher educators who challenge these state mandates.

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This resolution was passed unanimously by the Women's Caucus, and forwarded for discussion by the entire Assembly, comprised of CFA local presidents and representatives from all 23 CSU campuses. The Delegate Assembly approved it. After the meeting there was some discussion of how to address these mandates legislatively. Because teacher educators and teachers alike are so overworked, it is difficult for faculty on individual campuses to meet and discuss such important issues, let alone statewide. A forum on these issues is crucial. Trying to organize statewide dialogues without funding of time and money make it harder for teacher educators to question mandates imposed from the top. This is why we have chosen to write for this issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly*. (NOTE: If you would like to respond to the survey, see the appendix to this article. Please copy it, distribute it to faculty in your department, and fax copies back to me as soon as possible).

The following week I returned from the annual American Educational Studies Association (AESA) conference in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I found that teacher educators from across the United States were addressing the very same concerns about top-down imposition of reductionist standards on credential programs. Faculty were advocating that teacher educators and allies find ways to halt this movement. It's obvious that it is being forced down people's throats across the United States. Can we contribute to organizing a grassroots movement against these destructive federally-generated mandates?

So, what can be done? We need to reeducate the public about the implications of such top-down mandates. What ideas do people have for a broad and deep dialogue at the local, county, and statewide levels towards action geared against further degradation, de-professionalization, standardization, and devaluation of our work as teacher educators? Isn't this a violation of our academic freedom? What alternatives, and/or fundamental changes are we willing to consider to maintain the integrity of our teaching and the academic freedom of our curriculum? Some teacher educators are less concerned about the challenges to the content, which a few see as minor, although reducing units reduces the depth of program content. Rather they are demoralized by the vast amount of time being spent jumping through dumbing-down hoops to placate administrators, who feel that they must impose these standards upon faculty in order to ensure state certification of credential programs. Many feel that they will be able to teach some of the same content as in the past, but feel outraged about the duplicitous, unethical, and fraudulent process to which they are being subjected. They are also concerned about the loss of academic freedom and loss of control over their work as teacher educators. Many also realize that this mandate is a glaring example of institutional racism. Finally, many are aware that with the state of the California budget, probably much of the assessment segment will be dumped into our laps, with no monies to support the project. Because the assessment of this 'package' is an unfunded mandate, it may fall by the wayside. Efforts are currently being made to stall the timeline for implementation of the assessment package, because most

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campuses haven't had enough time to prepare themselves for this piece of the mandate. Yet the for-profit Educational Testing Services will most likely get its budgeted \$3.7 million from the development of assessment tools.

Individual responses, not unlike the divisive critique in which Jonathan Kozol shames teachers into paralysis, or to take some form of individual action in *Savage Inequalities*, will do little to reverse the "combine that rolls across our educational terrain" (Kozol, 1991). Perhaps we have already lost our autonomy, not unlike the production workers in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, where we have succumbed to top-down programming. Do we serve at the beck and call, without question? Are we becoming de-professionalized civil servants; unquestioningly performing like automatons, as we 'stamp out' certified, new teachers, without concern for race, class, gender, poverty, or language? I think not. Our workload has escalated so that we hardly have time to reflect on these new mandates, let alone talk to one another about what we might do to organize a movement against these attacks on equity and academic freedom. With fear of layoffs, especially on the part of part-timers in the CSU, some faculty members confide that they cannot speak out against such mandates. Teacher educators without tenure or job security cringe in silence as they are whispered to by administrators, who urge them shamelessly to not even use the terms 'equity, social justice, multicultural education, racism, sexism, and linguism' in their revised program documents. We need to very seriously think about what we are doing, and what might be done.

What shape California public education takes has implications for other states, as well as other countries (Ahlquist, 2002; Perry & Fraser, 1997). California public education, its curriculum, policies, and practices, serve as a model for many states and countries to emulate. The implications of these changes are global. Over the past 30 years in California, public school curriculum was reshaped by grassroots cultural and political movements to make it more equitable, ethnically, racially, and linguistically. It is currently facing a major backlash, generated in great part by corporate interests (Berlak, 2002). The repercussions for teacher educators include more control over what is worth teaching and thus knowing, less validation for our professional rights and responsibilities, and prescribed methods to assess the state-driven content with standardized tests. The outcomes for society include a de-skilled, degraded "product," rather than a critically aware, activist, intelligent, well-informed, questioning, ethically responsible citizen.

One thing we can do is to begin to talk more with each other about the implications of these mandates on our programs and the future of teacher education and the credentialing process. It is not too late to begin these dialogues. We would benefit from more active leadership. We could hold forums on our campuses to better inform our colleagues in other colleges. We need to educate our local faculty union so that it can provide us with better support. We might go to our local and state academic senates to get assistance around the issue of academic freedom. We would benefit from informing the educational communities that we serve, including

parents. Shouldn't teacher education faculty have authentic involvement in deciding the content of their curriculum? For the most part we have been sidetracked by the state level committees and the Commission on Teacher Credentialing. We also need to better educate the legislators who voted to support these mandates. Finally, we need to collaboratively craft legislation to undo these restrictive mandates that have been laid on us.

Whatever we do, it must be well-informed, collaborative action. Teacher educators who advocate various forms of critical pedagogy are now faced with actually demonstrating how we might 'walk the talk.' What political action can we take to reverse these mandates without getting 'cut' by the razor-sharp edge of big business interests' tools? Moral outrage will help, but it is not enough. Informing the public is critical. But it will take time, courage, and commitment to act against this massively inequitable, de-contextualized, dumbing-down of our curriculum and practices. We need to consider legislation that gives teacher educators an authentic voice in the content and assessment of their teaching. This big business agenda is against democracy, and serves to produce more compliant, unquestioning workers, without critical thinking skills, who unquestionably accept the agenda of the corporate military industrial complex. It is occurring not only in education, but also in other institutions in our society. Will teacher educators be blindly or "eyes-wide-open" led down the path of hoops that corporate interests have set up for us to jump through? What alternatives exist? What would happen if teacher educators refused to dumb-down their curriculum? What are the consequences for challenging this corporate driven agenda? What would happen if people didn't comply, but wrote programs which supported major concerns of a quality program that they have researched and tested over time? What if CTC didn't certify these programs? Would the sky fall?

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**Appendix I**

Survey for Teacher Educators in the CSU and Private Institutions  
Information compiled by Roberta Ahlquist, SJSU  
October 10, 2002

1. Have faculty in your department recently (within the past year or two) had to revamp your credential program (& curriculum) to address new Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) Standards?
2. What were the most important revisions/changes that occurred? Please be as explicit as possible.
3. What was your attitude towards these major changes from 1-5 with 1 being most supportive, 5 being least supportive?  
1            2            3            4            5
4. What do you think would happen if you chose not to make these changes advocated by CTC?
5. Would you be willing to challenge any of these revisions? On a scale from 1 to 5: with 1 being most willing, and 5 being least willing.  
1            2            3            4            5
6. Would you be willing to work with other teacher educators to change some of the program mandate? On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being most willing, and 5 being least willing.  
1            2            3            4            5

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