

Corporate Control of Public School Goals: High-Stakes Testing in Its Historical Perspective

By Kathy Emery

[I]t is impossible to understand the present or prepare for the future unless we have knowledge of the past. . . .

—from Malcolm X “On Afro-American History”

In the last 20 years, public education in the United States has been transformed under the pressures of high-stakes testing. Some argue that right wing ideologists are out to privatize the public school system in order to wring as much profit from the system as they can. Others argue that the new reforms are needed because for too long, teachers have allowed working class students of color to fail in schools. Both of these views and their variations, however, suffer from a lack of historical perspective. If one puts the current educational reform movement in an historical context, then what can be seen is the following pattern: When the job categories in

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the U.S. economy undergo a fundamental realignment, business leaders move to transform the public school system to sort the nation’s children into the new categories and socialize them to accept these arrangements. This theoretical paradigm explains a lot of things, including the widespread bipartisan support that No Child Left Behind enjoys today.

Brief Historical Context of High-Stakes Testing

The creation of the modern U.S. public school system was coincident with the emergence of manufacturing after the American Revolution. By the 1830s, the Northeastern part of the United States was shifting from an agricultural economy to a manufacturing economy, and Massachusetts was ground zero in that transformation. This can partly explain why the Massachusetts state legislature was interested in Horace Mann's proposal to establish a state board of education. Mann proposed a state school system that would produce disciplined and obedient adults by teaching every White child to obey the law and evince the Christian morals of hard work and thrift (Spring, 1986; pp. 84-5). Opponents, like Orestes Brownson, feared state control of local education because he believed the Board would "Prussianize" education through its mandates (Spring, 1986; p. 97). In spite of strong opposition from organized workingmen's associations, the common school advocates successfully lobbied the state legislature to establish a state board of education in 1837. Other state legislatures adopted similar legislation in the ensuing years, thereby creating the fundamental structures we have inherited today.

The "common school" system that has developed since 1837 was designed to be uniform. To accomplish that, a centralized bureaucracy was created in order to impose a fairly standard curriculum in every school. Standardized textbooks, graded classes, and administrative supervision of acquiescent teachers would become defining characteristics of the U.S. public school system (Tyack, 1967; p. 314). Tyack (1982) argued that "the first element of bureaucracy" is the "centralization of control and supervision." Boston school bureaucrats, for example, began this process in 1851 with the appointment of the first full time, salaried administrator (superintendent). Principals of the, then, six schools were appointed in 1866 and a new layer of bureaucracy between the superintendent and principals was added in 1876 (p. 60). Such central supervision allowed for the imposition of a uniform curriculum. This purpose was made explicit in the Buffalo school boards' instructions to its first superintendent in 1837. The school board initiated a system of age-grading and gave the superintendent the specific assignment of writing a uniform course of study for each grade (Spring, 1986; p. 139).

The growing number of schools and increasing student population within each of the schools created greater challenges for city superintendents. The superintendent, to ensure uniformity of content and method, could no longer make periodic visits to all the classrooms, nor could his administrative assistants fulfil such an increasingly burdensome task. This led state legislatures to turn their attention to systematizing teacher training. As a cost-saving measure, state legislatures had authorized private academies to train teachers to meet the growing needs of the emerging common schools. Increasingly, however, some legislatures found the need to establish State Normal Schools or add grade levels to the public schools so as to control the training of the teachers more closely. For example, in 1844, the New

York State Legislature withdrew state funds from the private academies because they were allowing their students to follow their own whims, had not subjected them “to a rigor of daily examinations,” nor exposed the students long enough to recitations (Herbst, 1996, p. 25).

The first major transformation in the common public school system since its inception took place during the Progressive period (1890-1920). In the late 19th century, as the U.S. economy shifted from a manufacturing to an industrial economy, business leaders eliminated working class participation in local school boards in order to create comprehensive high schools that used newly invented standardized tests to create a tracking system. The newly recruited working class students were placed into vocational education courses and middle class students were placed into a course of study that would produce the emerging middle management sector of the new corporate organization. The reigning business model of the day, scientific management, was to be applied to school administration.¹ The new “platoon system” came to resemble the factory model of the turn of the 20th century so as to socialize new immigrant labor into the new business model.

Sorting the school age population into general job categories was not the only purpose of the new “scientifically-managed” comprehensive school system. During the 1880s and 1890s, a strong labor movement and urban Settlement House movement were pressing school boards to use schools as community centers to empower the new immigrants politically and socially. Most of the urban school boards were still elected by ward or district and, as a result, were responsive to organized working class demands. This can be seen in their adoption of multicultural curriculum, kindergartens, health facilities, playgrounds, auditoriums, summer schools, and night schools. The business elite were threatened by this evidence of authentic democratic activity among the newly arrived immigrant population. The process of rolling back such populist gains began with a propaganda campaign to discredit local leaders. In 1885, John Philbrick, U. S. Commissioner of Education, issued a report on school boards calling them “corrupt” and lacking in “expertise, virtue, professionalism, intelligence, and dedication.” Accusations such as these inspired city superintendents to organize and demand more power based on their professional expertise. One manifestation of this was a report by the National Education Association issued in 1895 calling for superintendents to be independent of school boards (Callahan, 1975, p. 26).

State legislatures rewrote school board charters giving the superintendent more power and reducing the size and composition of the locally-elected policymaking body. Part of the argument made to justify these anti-democratic reforms was that it was necessary to lift education “above politics,” and to eliminate lay influence by putting educational decisions in the hands of professionals. By reducing the size of city school boards (e.g., from 46 to seven in New York) and by either eliminating elections or making the elections at large (instead of by district or ward), several historians have discovered that business leaders were able to eliminate working

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class representation and influence on the school boards (Cuban, 1995; Callahan 1962; Hays, 1983).²

After successfully seizing control of urban school boards across the nation, business leaders set about to transform the common school system to ensure that schooling both sorted and socialized students to conform to the emerging industrial order.

Embedded within teacher-centered instruction were a set of assumptions about school, children, and learning consistent with the profound changes occurring at the turn of the century in the larger culture. Notions of bureaucratic efficiency, organizational uniformity, standardization, and a growing passion for anything viewed as scientific were prized in the rapidly expanding industrial and corporate sector of the economy. School officials and teachers came to share many of these beliefs as well. Harnessed to an infant science of educational psychology that believed children learned best through repetition and memorization, these social beliefs, reinforced by the scientific knowledge of the day about learning, anchored teacher-centered instruction deeply in the minds of teachers and administrators at the turn of the century. (Cuban, 1984, p. 31)

Crucial to successful implementation of scientific, teacher-centered standardization was the invention and application of standardized testing.³ The so-called intelligence tests that were being developed at the turn of the century were adapted to the secondary school system, effectively tracking the working class students into vocational education courses and middle class students into college preparatory courses. It is this tracking system that is being replaced by the current corporate-inspired education reforms.

In the last 20 years, the U.S. economy has undergone a third fundamental change from an industrial economy to a service economy. Correspondingly, corporate CEOs have devised a new system whereby a new tracking system tracks upper class students into college and lower class students into the service sector or, conveniently, into prison. Intentionally built into standardized tests is a very strong correlation to socio-economic status (Popham, 2001). In the last 20 years, urban Black and Brown students have been resegregated into schools that are necessarily “low-performing” as their socio-economic status is correspondingly low. The students in these “low-performing” schools are subjected to a drill and de-skill, test-prep curriculum while the “high-performing” schools continue to get the kind of college-prep curriculum that has characterized middle class education for the last 100 years.

The rhetoric supporting this transformation includes virtuous phraseology such as “closing the achievement gap,” or “ending the soft bigotry of low expectations.” But this belies the reality of what is happening. What is happening is a polarization of wealth. Bush’s tax cuts have merely exacerbated the effects of disappearing union and middle management jobs due to the modern version of globalization. Most of the middle class have sunk into the working class and many in the working class have sunk to minimum wage and below. The new tracking system feeds the new structures of the New Economy while the rhetoric of high-

stakes testing legitimizes the underfunding of schools (money is not needed, only “high expectations” and “high standards”) and the increasing numbers of pushouts who fill up the growing service sector jobs and the nation’s prisons.⁴ According to the rhetoric, state and national legislation is focused on closing the achievement gap and forcing teachers to have high expectations. Anyone who fails under such a regime, well, it must be the fault of the student and his or her family.

Current Modern Educational Reform, BRT Style

A conspiracy theory attempts to explain the ultimate cause of an event (usually a political, social, or historical event) as a secret, and often deceptive, plot by a covert alliance of powerful people or organizations rather than as an overt activity or as natural occurrence.

—Definition of “conspiracy theory” from *Wikipedia*

In my dissertation (Emery, 2002) and the book version of it published by Heinemann (Emery & Ohanian, 2004), I argue that the Business Roundtable (BRT)—the top CEOs in this country—agreed during the summer of 1989 to transform the U.S. public school system through high-stakes testing. From 1989 to the present day, the BRT CEOs have worked to align a wide variety of institutions and organizations behind their educational reform agenda. I have been accused of writing a “diatribe against corporate leaders,” with a “radical and conspiracy-filled voice”⁵ when laying out the results of my research. I confess to being bitter about the undue influence the corporate elite have over public policy and the hubris with which they wield their power. But I don’t think my argument qualifies as a conspiracy theory in that there is nothing hidden about the BRT’s motives, intentions, and strategies. These are articulated in a series of publications on their own website.⁶ The Business Roundtable lays their hand clearly on the table and their fingerprints are visible for anyone who is willing to look.

Cornell Maier, a business lobbyist in California, argued in 1989 that the BRT decided to engineer consensus among the business leadership since the scale and effect of business-led reforms in the 1980s did not match the perceived need.

When they first read *A Nation at Risk*, the 1983 report . . . businessmen charged into partnership with the schools. Companies, in their thousands, hurried to adopt schools. These partnerships, which included things like buying chic uniforms for school bands and school basketball teams, make local people happy. But business leaders began to realize that they did nothing for true educational reform. But the Boston Compact, and the copycat programs that followed, are today regarded as a disappointment. In Boston the number of students failing to complete high school has actually increased. The partnership programs now tend to be dismissed as no more than ‘temporary palliatives.’ [This is why, in the summer of 1989], the Business Roundtable devoted their entire annual meeting to the subject. (Maier, 1989)

One probable reason for the BRT executives’ decision to take the lead in 1989

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was the continuing loss in vehicle sales to Japan that was “call[ing] into question American industrial competitiveness.”⁷ At the BRT’s annual meeting in the summer of 1989, the CEOs agreed on an educational model that was remarkably similar to their new business model, a tepid adaptation of Japan’s Quality Control system.

The U.S. version of Quality Control—Total Quality Management (TQM)—has involved upper management setting production goals, “downsizing” middle management, and expecting line workers to share greater responsibility in deciding how to meet production goals as well as doing the actual production. The BRT educational model roughly outlined in the summer of 1989 and refined in 1995 similarly established upper management control of production by demanding that every state legislature adopt state content standards enforced by penalties and rewards meted out according to the results of annual, state-mandated standardized tests. Central office administrators and school boards were seen as superfluous “middle management” since “site-based decision making” would give the “assembly line” workers (teachers) greater responsibility in deciding how to meet the production goals (test score benchmarks).⁸

From 1989 to the present day, the BRT CEOs have been stubbornly insistent that public education must be fundamentally transformed. They have taken credit for “aligning” the power brokers behind their vision of what that transformation should be, and there is little reason to doubt their claims. Edward Rust argued in 1999 that the BRT engineered the creation of

... the Business Coalition for Education Reform [BCER], now a 13-member group⁹ that serves as a unified voice for the corporate community, and in developing a Common Agenda for reform endorsed by the business community . . . Roundtable companies are at the forefront of a national effort by businesses to stimulate academic progress by aligning their hiring, philanthropic and site location practices with our education reform agenda. (Rust, 1999)

Rust’s assessment seems to be born out as every policy and argument put forth in the BRT publications has been repeated word for word by people from a wide variety of organizations on which CEOs either are members or are major financial contributors, one way or another. State governors, educational leaders, state legislators, news reporters, foundation executives and university researchers all repeat the BRT rhetoric in support for “high standards for all. . . equity and excellence. . . world class education for a world class, 21st Century economy .” This rhetoric, because it is repeated so often, has become a new myth that hides the reality of the new economic and political relationships in this nation.

There’s a persistent myth, perpetuated by economists who should know better . . . that rising inequality in the United States is mainly a matter of a rising gap between those with a lot of education and those without. But census data show that the real earnings of the typical college graduate actually fell in 2004. In short, it’s a great economy if you’re a high-level corporate executive or someone who owns a lot of stock. For most other Americans, economic growth is a spectator sport. (Krugman, 2006)

A recent article in the *The Economist* (October 7, 2006) indicated why CEOs and their allies would want to support the myth that education is the engine of social mobility.

There is something appealing about the meritocratic ideal: most people are willing to accept wide inequalities if they are coupled with equality of opportunity. In America, where two-thirds of the population believe that everyone has an equal chance to get ahead, far fewer people favour income redistribution than in Europe (p. 24) . . . The best way to head off a backlash [against the current growing inequality of wealth] is to give everybody a fair chance. . . . Developed countries need to toughen up their schools. In the 1960s, too many schools were lowering standards in the name of child-centered education and shifting the emphasis away from science and mathematics. The chief victims of this were underprivileged children who could not rely on their parents to make up for the deficiencies of their schools. (p. 24)

In other words, as long as the working poor *believe* their schools drill students on the same thing, in the same way, and at the same time without exception (which is the current definition of equal opportunity under high-stakes testing), then they will accept the declining wages and disappearing benefits that is the major characteristic of the New (service) Economy.

The BRT-Engineered Network

Since 1989, the BRT has successfully persuaded the nation's governors, mayors, legislators, educators, researchers, editors, foundation executive directors, parent leaders, and others that the best way to close the "achievement gap" is through high-stakes testing. How were approximately 300 CEOs able to create such unanimity? Part of the answer lies in the structures they were able to create and in the money they control. Politicians are dependent on corporate donations to campaign coffers. Educational researchers increasingly depend on corporate-funded foundations or direct donations as public budgets continue to shrink under regressive tax policies.

The nation's governors have been socialized to promote high-stakes testing through the Education Commission of the States (ECS), an organization made up of governors and CEOs. In the Fall of 1989, all 50 governors met and agreed to support educational goals remarkably similar to the ones identified a few months before at the BRT annual meeting. ECS continued to socialize new governors as they were elected, encouraging competition among the governors to see who could implement the high-stakes testing agenda the fastest. In 1996, ECS created Achieve Inc. with a website that "includes a database that allows sophisticated searches and side-by-side comparisons of the standards of more than 40 states and several foreign countries."¹⁰ A remarkable number of governors began to refer to themselves as "the Education Governor," which reflected the new corporate competitive environment around education reform.

After the nation's governors expressed their support for "Goals 2000" in 1989,

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the BRT aimed their extensive lobbying machinery at the state legislatures. In 1990, the Business Roundtable launched a “50-state initiative.” Each state BRT organization¹¹ was given the task by the national BRT Education Task Force to lobby their respective state legislatures to adopt what would become the first three of BRT’s nine *Essential Components* (1995)—state content standards, state-mandated tests, rewards and sanctions tied to test results. When I interviewed Bill Hauck, president of the California Business Roundtable, he complained that California had been the first state to introduce high-stakes testing legislation but had been overtaken by Texas and North Carolina. Hauck attributed the loss of California’s lead to opposition by the California Teachers Association.¹² He sounded bitter about losing the high-stakes testing lead to North Carolina and Texas.

BRT executives were able to persuade the leadership of the American Federation of Teachers to jump on the bandwagon. Evidence that the AFT leadership was co-opted can be seen by the following quotation from the 1996 BRT publication, *A Business Leader’s Guide to Setting Academic Standards*.

Examples of Ineffectual, Unclear or Poorly Written Standards:

The following selections of standards are cited by the American Federation of Teachers as examples of what to avoid. The AFT criticizes these standards for being confusing, not academic enough and overly focused on skills at the expense of knowledge Many of the standards below met objections from members of the public and business community *and were rewritten as a result* [my emphasis]. (BRT, 1996)

The examples that followed this introduction suggest that the AFT lent its support to the process of eliminating those state standards that promoted “divergent thinking” and “care-giving skills.” The other major teacher’s union, the National Educational Association, refused to be so co-opted. But they still remained within the fold by complaining only that NCLB is underfunded, not seeming to realize that more funding would only make the effects of high-stakes testing more damaging, not less.

The uncompromising unanimity of the nation’s media editors behind the high-stakes testing agenda is not so surprising when you think of what has happened to the newspaper industry in the last twenty years. McChesney (1999) observes one consequence of the media mergers of the 1980s and 90s

. . . [I]f there are only handful of companies and there is not much competition, they have a lot of power to pick what range of the pie you get to pick from, and it’s a fairly narrow range. . . . Also, markets are based on one dollar, one vote. So people with lots of money get lots of votes, people with no money get a lot less votes or no votes. Is that the best system for journalism? (McChesney, 1999)

Public Agenda, a corporate funded non-profit organization, provides poll results for deadline-driven reporters. The questions asked in the polls reveal just how narrow the range of the pie is. The range is narrow enough so that those polled are not being asked if they disagree with the current practice of using one test score

to define what is or is not being learned in a classroom or school. In fact, Public Agenda wants to make it clear that they have

... been monitoring Americans' views on academic standards, standardized testing, No Child Left Behind and other key elements of the standards movement for more than a decade. Our Reality Check surveys and other research have shown repeatedly that support for raising standards is broad and heart-felt, and based on the 2006 data, that core of support remains intact. In multiple findings, parents, teachers and students say standards and testing are necessary. Parents and teachers give local districts high marks for pursuing standards-based reform carefully and reasonably. (Public Agenda, 2006)

Parents, teachers and students in most schools say that current manifestations of "standards and testing" are not going away and they need to figure out a way to learn to live with them. That is not the same as saying that standards and assessment are necessary. But who gets to decide what the standards are, what role they play, what kinds of assessments are used and in what way, are issues that have carefully been kept out of the polling questionnaires and, thereby, off the table for debate.

The BRT, since 1995 has decided what the goals of education are and then assigned politicians and administrators to make sure teachers adhere to those goals. Top CEO's use their influence in the media world to make sure the debate is confined to the means and not the ends of high-stakes testing reform. Reporters operate within the parameters that their editors set and incessant and frequent deadlines make investigative reporting a thing of the past. As a result, reporters are often hostage to sources like Public Agenda for their information, which only exacerbates the phenomena of "group think."

Group Think

The Problem: The achievement gap is now a problem. Upper middle class Whites test better than lower income students of color. Students in other countries test better than those in the U.S. This is because the public school system in the United States doesn't have high standards. The self-esteem crowd of the Sixties and Seventies lowered academic standards for all students and White teachers have lower expectations for their students of color than they have for their White students.

The Solution: Every state establish rigorous state standards with state tests. Rewards and sanctions will force teachers to teach every student to high standards. High expectations, not increased funding or smaller class size, is the key to high achievement. Students and their parents will have only themselves to blame if they fail under this system.

The educational research community and non-profits have officially signed onto various versions of this group think in spite of research that challenges the central assumptions upon which this thinking is based. Why this has happened is very complex. Most individuals, I am sure, have not agreed to go along with the new group think gladly or without reservations. Part of the problem is that most people

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feel powerless to oppose policy and are in denial about how policy is, indeed, directed by a very few people.

That the erosion of independence and creativity in the classroom has been slow and piecemeal over the last 20 years has also contributed to the successful cooptation of teachers (the frog in the slowly boiling pot phenomenon).¹³ By 2002, most of the educational leadership had already been co-opted. One example of the successful cooptation of educators can be seen in the role that so-called “non-partisan” non-profits have played in directing teachers to accept the terms of the debate (i.e. focusing efforts on raising test scores instead of questioning the validity of standardized tests). The Educational Trust seems to have been assigned the specific task of promoting the achievement gap rhetoric. Never mind that standardized tests are constructed so that there is a strong and intentional correlation to socio-economic status (Popham, 2001). Never mind that the Joint Committee on Testing Practices (the people who make the tests) say that it is unethical to make important decisions based on a single test score. Never mind that scores from one year to the next are invalid because they are not “matched” (scores of two different groups of students are being compared as if they are the same group!). Never mind that if the achievement gap disappeared magically, most jobs in this country still would not pay well or require a college degree (the opposite is happening, working class wages are falling and middle class jobs are disappearing).

These facts don’t seem to curb the enthusiasm of the people at Ed Trust who argue the BRT-line with tremendous enthusiasm and persistence:

All students can meet high levels of academic performance when they are taught to high levels (p.9) . . . [B]ring[ing] every student to a high level of performance is both necessary and feasible . . . by the time the students in our elementary schools graduate from high school, college attendance will probably be near universal. (Education Trust, 1999)

... [today] there is increasing consensus among economists (and among families) that virtually all young people need the knowledge and skills necessary to benefit from postsecondary education. (Education Trust, 2004)

While seemingly given the task to hammer home the “achievement gap” argument, Ed Trust and the MetLife Foundation have also taken on the task of co-opting school counsellors.

In June 2003, the Education Trust and MetLife Foundation established the National Center for Transforming School Counseling (NCTSC). This new Center continues the work supported by the Dewitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund and MetLife Foundation to ensure school counselors across the country are trained and ready to help ALL groups of students reach high academic standards. (Education Trust, 2003)

When I attended the 6th Annual Forum on the State of Guidance and Counseling in Schools at the University of San Diego in December, 2004, the Ed Trust was charismatically represented at the conference by Trish Hatch. According to her website, Hatch is an expert “in the ‘Use of Data to Effect Change,’ [and] ‘Designing

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Standards and Results-Based School Counseling” (Hatch, 2006a). I attended one of Hatch’s workshops in which she explained how school counselors can and must use test score results to guide their efforts in supporting student learning. Her career is devoted to getting the school counseling community aligned with the high-stakes testing agenda. Hatch argues on her website:

. . . while others in education have shifted to standards based education and begun to measure the results of their programs, school counselors have not had a professionally endorsed mechanism to do the same. The ASCA National Model [which Hatch co-authored] is an organizational system school counselors can use as a framework to design, develop, implement, evaluate and improve their programs. (Hatch, 2006b)

Hatch is not alone in jumping on the bandwagon while persuading herself that she is promoting social justice and civil rights, which is how she characterizes the achievement gap rhetoric. Getting educators to shift their careers, research, pedagogy and values so they are aligned with “data driven” reform, i.e., test-driven educational reform, has been the systematic plan of corporate business since 1989. Edward Rust argued that the BRT purposely has organized a network of national business organization behind “a national effort . . . to stimulate academic progress by aligning their hiring, philanthropic and site location practices with our education reform agenda” (Rust, 1999). Corporate foundations engaged in educational reform or supportive of educational research are, with very few exceptions, interested only in results measured by standardized test scores. If a proposal doesn’t promise to raise test scores and close the achievement gap, then they are not interested in funding it. It doesn’t matter that most of their funded programs have failed to close the achievement gap.

Like the Neocon’s insistence on “staying the course” in Iraq, CEO’s also feel they can change entire systems through will power and force from above. They know that “large organizations such as schools ‘don’t change because they see the light; they change because they feel the heat’” (Rust, 1999). In fact, by 2000, the BRT believed they were well on the way to effecting the desired fundamental transformation.

Now that [standards based reforms] are beginning to be implemented at the local school and district level, continued leadership and involvement of BRT companies is even more important. There still is a long way to go before we see U.S. education performance that meets or exceeds the best in the world. (BRT, 2000)

They were prepared to “stay the course” in the face of expected resistance, acknowledging that they still “had a long way to go.” But they weren’t quite prepared for the success of the backlash against their agenda. Ten years after settling on a plan to transform the U.S. public schools, only 20 state legislatures had passed high-stakes testing legislation.¹⁴ As state BRT organizations had “work[ed] to raise expectations for student learning, many [were] challenged by concerns and questions from increasingly vocal parents and teachers” (BRT, 2001). In order to deal with this “backlash,” the BRT published a manual of “advice for business coalitions

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and standards advocates . . . on how to address the ‘testing backlash.’” (BRT, 2001). They concluded that

... flaws in implementation are inevitable. Now is the time to deal appropriately with the warning signs of discontent, to focus on getting the policy right, and to communicate more broadly about how to make the system work. Now is also the time to continue insisting on consequences for performance. However, it is not the time to avoid the painful truths about school performance that test results make apparent. Resolving these issues requires leadership, endurance and commitment—attributes the business community will continue to bring to public advocacy for better schools. (BRT, 2001, p.25)

It was also the time to rewrite the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Given the sense of being stalled in 2001, it is not unlikely that the BRT executives saw an opportunity to align federal education policy with their state-by-state lobbying efforts. Eugene Hickock, Under Secretary of Education, speaking to corporate CEO’s at the 2003 Michael Milken Global Conference, indicated how the BRT may have approached the opportunity of influencing the re-authorization process of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001.

One of the virtues of NCLB is leverage, leverage at the state. . . at the local level. We don’t mind being the bad guys, in terms of the ones pushing it. But I think our concern is that we are short sighted in how much leverage we could use. I think it’s leverage that could create a revolution in American education. And that’s necessary. In itself and by itself it won’t do it but it’s the difference that might change everything forever. (Hickock, 2003)

The “leverage” afforded by NCLB seemed to have the desired effect. By 2004, Education Week Online’s state-by-state report cards gave ten states an “A,” 16 states a “B,” and 12 states a “C”¹⁵ in their efforts to establish high-stakes testing. And the federal government has certainly succeeded in becoming the “bad guy,” successfully drawing attention away from state education policy (e.g., high school exit exams) and focusing local discontent on a much more distant representatives. Thus was the “testing backlash” of the 1990s effectively neutralized and the plan to “change everything forever” continues to grind forward.

What Is To Be Done?

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please: they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

—Karl Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

The educational reforms being put in place that are associated with high-stakes testing, while justifying the creation of real and painful changes in schools—re-segregation, under-funding, downsizing, outsourcing and a new tracking system—have not fundamentally changed the essential characteristics of a centralized, bureaucratic system. This system has maintained certain characteristics since its

inception. Larry Cuban (1984) cited Barbara Finkelstein's research on elementary school pedagogy between 1820 and 1880:

teachers talked a great deal. Students either recited passages from textbooks, worked at their desks on assignments, or listened to the teacher and classmates during the time set aside for instruction. Teachers assigned work and expected uniformity from students both in behavior and class work." (p. 19)

Cuban points out that no comprehensive study of turn of the century high school pedagogy has been done. But his review of existing piecemeal studies suggests that Finkelstein's description of elementary education can be applied to high school instruction as well with the following qualifications: "Subject matter was stressed far more . . . students traveled from class to class to meet with different teachers for about an hour at a time . . ." and the high school classes were smaller than the elementary ones (p. 30). Challenges to this system have always existed and even became a movement during two periods (1890-1940 and 1960-75).¹⁶ Many parents, teachers and students, throughout the history of the U.S. public school system have been unhappy with what Carl Rogers has called the Traditional Mode of education in which

1. The teacher is the possessor of knowledge, the student the expected recipient.
2. The lecture, the textbook, or some other means of verbal intellectual instruction are the major methods of getting knowledge into the recipient. The examination measures the extent to which the student has received it. These are the central elements of this kind of education.
3. The teacher is the possessor of power, the student the one who obeys.
4. Rule by authority is the accepted policy in the classroom.
5. Trust is at a minimum.
6. The subjects (students) are best governed by being kept in an intermittent or constant state of fear.
7. Democracy and its values are ignored and scorned in practice.
8. There is no place for the whole person in the educational system, only for her intellect. (Rogers, 1983, pp. 185-194)

Many teachers, today, are extremely unhappy with the scripted curriculum and clipboard police that are common practice in the nation's resegregated "low-performing" schools. At the same time, however, many of these same teachers continue to accept the traditional mode of education upon which the BRT agenda has built its educational reform agenda:

1. standardized tests measure academic knowledge and ability;
2. success in school will lead to a good paying job;

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3. success in secondary school will allow one to go to college;
4. individual hard work and discipline guarantee success;
5. failure is the fault of the individual or his or her family;
6. a good education is the only avenue for social mobility;
7. those who have money have the right to determine policy;
8. there are necessarily winners and losers—competition sorts them out efficiently and fairly.

Much has been said about the destruction of the public school system under the threat of vouchers and charters. Teachers and many parents are certainly experiencing the current fundamental transformation of the public school system as a destruction of public schools *as they have known them*. But that doesn't mean that the top CEO's in this nation, with their high-stakes testing agenda, are attempting to eliminate publicly funded schools altogether. Current evidence, when placed in its historical context, suggests the BRT wishes to *transform* not destroy public schools—create a new tracking system (college prep and prison prep¹⁷) administered by a leaner and meaner bureaucracy. One can quibble over the point at which transformation becomes destruction, but the purpose of making this distinction is very strategic for those teachers who wish to alter the course of this current historical trend.

Teachers generally object to the high-stakes testing by claiming it is destroying the status quo. They argue that the fundamental structure of the existing public school system is sound, needing only minor tinkering.¹⁸ This defensive position allows the high-stakes advocates to paint teachers as defending a system that has never served the needs of poor students of color and their parents or guardians (there has *always* been an achievement gap!). This has successfully kept the three affected constituencies (parents, students and teachers) from joining together to mount an effective counterinsurgency.

Class and cultural divisions between teachers and urban parents are not new. Teachers, for decades, have been overwhelmingly white, middle-class females and urban public school parents are primarily of color and working class. Superintendents are being trained in institutes (like those of the Broad Foundation) to exacerbate the cultural and class divisions between middle and working class parents and focus blame for continuing school failure on the white teachers. Teachers, so targeted, feel they have no choice but to agree that they are for “high standards” and against the “soft bigotry of low expectations,” thereby automatically buying into the high-stakes testing agenda. Further undermining teachers' abilities to resist the testing rhetoric is their ignorance of the technology of the tests, including the inherent threats to the validity of the scores. Teacher unions, still operating under the premises of the old economy, haven't adjusted their tactics or strategies to the politics of the new, service economy.

The only way that the historical conflict between these teachers and parents can

be overcome is in the context of a social movement. Jean Anyon, in *Radical Possibilities* (2005), argues that there can be no real systemic progressive educational reform unless it is the context of a social movement.¹⁹ History seems to agree with her. Yet, at the moment, we are in between social movements. Corporate America has learned the lessons of the Sixties well. Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, like Roosevelt's New Deal, succeeded in undermining and co-opting the very organizations, leaders and programs that had begun to create real participatory leadership at the local level.²⁰ Corporate foundations today have taken over where federal programs have left off, draining organizing capacity into non-profits who are pitted against each other for both government and corporate foundation support. In this and other ways, community organizations fail to form the kinds of coalitions that a social movement requires.

Anyon (2005, Chapter 9) points to IAF, PICO, and ACORN²¹ and other groups as evidence of growing structural support for the next social movement. But, what will happen to the funding of these groups if they truly become effective at mobilizing local communities to restructure the decision making process so that corporate CEOs no longer monopolize the decision-making process? Will these groups bite the hand that feeds them? If so, do they have a plan to survive the response? Anyon also argues that teachers can play a key role in helping these various groups form powerful coalitions

... [T]he disastrous state of the educational systems in urban areas today could provide impetus to organizing a new social movement. . . . In U.S. cities, moreover, several active but largely unreported progressive movements are already flourishing: community and education organizing, the living wage movement, progressive labor and faith-based coalitions, and a new and urgent emergence of organized urban youth . . . What needs to be accomplished is a convergence of these various movements around a set of issues that all can agree are crucial . . . Concerned public school educators would be key in all this work. (Anyon, 2005, p. 5)

I am hoping that Anyon is correct in this analysis. Social movements develop when knowledgeable organizers connect with local infrastructures at the right historical moment. But teachers and their unions are not thinking along these lines—yet.

For the past five years, I have been part of various groups who were trying to organize teachers, parents, and students around affordable housing, universal health care and a progressive vision for educational reform. My disappointment in the limited effectiveness of these efforts led me to return to studying history for some answers. This led me and three others to create a “Freedom School” in San Francisco in the summer of 2005. Our Freedom School²² is not focused on academic achievement, which to my mind, is buying into the corporate paradigm. Instead, we took our inspiration directly from the Citizenship Curriculum of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Schools.²³ We feel that we can make a small contribution to the next social movement by teaching the detailed history of the Southern Freedom Movement so that those who need nurturing, inspiration or tool building can learn from the past.

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Community members, students and educators within schools need a place to go to gain or retain perspective on and rekindle their passion for issues of social justice. We are hoping the SF Freedom School can make a small contribution in this direction. Analysing how social movements have happened (their successes and failures) is crucial if teachers are going to be part, as Anyon encourages them to be, of creating the next one.

Notes

¹ For a good summary of the application of “scientific management” or “Taylorism” to the public school system, read Callahan, R. (1962). *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

² Elimination of working-class representation by replacing district elections with at-large elections works in the following way: To successfully run a citywide campaign, a politician must have a highly sophisticated political machine as well as name recognition. The former is very expensive, the latter is a function of the degree to which one has already been born into a political family (e.g., John Q. Adams or George W. Bush) or has been able to make a name for oneself in the military (e.g., Andrew Jackson or Dwight Eisenhower). Members of the working class are systematically denied both wealth and family/political connections putting them at a distinct disadvantage when campaigning against the wealthy and powerful in an at-large election. The playing field, however, is more level if the campaign is confined to a part of the city in which the working class candidate grew up, has family, and can afford to run a grassroots, door-to-door campaign. Hays (1983) points out that the rhetoric of the progressive municipal reformers argued that people who ran for citywide positions would have the city’s, not special group’s, interests in mind. Such rhetoric, however, masked a more insidious effect. The success of the political progressives have made the “interests” of business owners and the so-called interests of the city or nation, in the minds of middle class Americans, the same. The “interests” of workers have been and continue to be falsely portrayed as opposed to that of the city and nation.

³ Thorndike, R. M., & D. F. Lohman (1990) reveal the irony that standardized test validity was based upon teacher and business leaders assumptions of what was intelligence and achievement in order to create a measurement that was free of bias. I review their book at <http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/SF/Thorndike.htm>

⁴ Some would add the military to this list as well, especially since one provision of NCLB requires local school districts to give the military access to the names and contact information of the students in the district. While those fighting and dying for the U.S. in Vietnam may have been disproportionately poor and of color, today’s army is very different. Like corporate America, it is leaner and meaner, more educated and more “patriotic” than the Vietnam era soldiers (Kane, 2005). Paradoxically, if the draft were reinstated today, it would probably end up filling the ranks with increasing numbers of poor, high school dropouts who don’t have the ability to engineer deferments like their white, middle class peers. Similarly, claims that the purpose of corporations is to privatise public schools should be given a closer look to see what the facts are that support such a claim.

⁵ Yung Lee, third Grade Teacher, Fairfax County, Virginia, 4/15/06 (part of a discussion at the Teachers Network Leadership Institute national listserv discussion, <http://www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/listarchive/emery.htm>)

⁶ See these key documents:

BRT, (1995), *Continuing the Commitment: Essential Components of a Successful*

Kathy Emery

Education System (<http://www.businessroundtable.org/pdf/130.pdf>) Business Roundtable.;

BRT, (1996), *A Business Leader's Guide to Setting Academic Standards* (<http://www.businessroundtable.org/pdf/80.pdf>) Business Roundtable.;

BRT, (1998), *Building Support for Tests that Count* (<http://www.businessroundtable.org/pdf/225.pdf>) Business Roundtable.;

BRT, (1999), *Transforming Educational Policy: Assessing Ten Years of Progress in the States* (<http://www.businessroundtable.org/pdf/326.pdf>);

BRT, (2001), *Assessing and Addressing the "Testing Backlash": Practical advice and current public opinion research for business coalitions and standards advocates* (<http://www.businessroundtable.org/pdf/525.pdf>) Business Roundtable.

⁷“Few issues have so gripped the automobile industry in recent years as the fight for market share among Japanese, European and United States companies. While G.M. was losing 10 percentage points of market share in the 1980s—an amount roughly equal to the Chrysler Corporation’s entire share—Japanese auto makers were gaining a similar amount. That gain by the Japanese has done much to aggravate trade friction between the countries and to call into question American industrial competitiveness.” *Economic Scene; Car Makers’ Fight For Market Share*, June 20, 1990, Doron, Levin (NYT); Financial Desk Late Edition—Final, Section D, Page 2, Column 1.

⁸One San Francisco city supervisor explained her support for the district superintendent’s strict implementation of high-stakes testing in this way: “I think of teachers as manufacturers and students as products” (SF Board of Supervisors Subcommittee hearing, January, 2005).

⁹ Among its members are: the Business Roundtable, the National Alliance of Business, and the U. S. Chamber of Commerce.

¹⁰“Achieve Inc.—Achieve, an independent, bipartisan organization created at the 1996 National Education Summit, serves as a national clearinghouse on standards, assessment and accountability. Its Web site includes a database that allows sophisticated searches and side-by-side comparisons of the standards of more than 40 states and several foreign countries. The Achieve site also includes news items, policy briefs and detailed analyses of the standards and assessments of several states that Achieve has conducted over the past two years.” (<http://www.ecs.org/html/Document.asp?chouseid=1735>, viewed 7/8/06).

¹¹ For example: California Businesses for Excellence in Education, Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, Missouri Partnership for Outstanding Schools, North Carolina’s Education: Everybody’s Business Coalition and Texas Business and Education Coalition, to name only a few.

¹² Telephone interview with author, 3/18/02.

¹³ For those who are interested in how good people can be made to do bad things by a bureaucracy, I recommend the case study written for the Mississippi Freedom School Schools in 1964, entitle the Nazi Seizure of Power which can be accessed at http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/FSCfiles/C_CC4c_NaziGermany.htm

¹⁴ 1999 BRT report, *Transforming Educational Policy: Assessing Ten Years of Progress in the States* (pp. 7-52).

¹⁵ Education Week Online has assigned grades to each of the state’s efforts at developing high-stakes testing. Interestingly, Ed Week uses the American Federation of Teacher’s

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definition of “clear and specific” to rate the content standards of each state. The report cards for each state can be found by going to <http://www.edweek.org/context/states/>, clicking on the desired state and looking for “Report Card.” According to Education Week Online, “A strong state accountability system has three main components: state-developed standards in the core subjects at all grade levels, state tests that are aligned with those standards, and methods of holding schools accountable for results, based in part on test scores.” (<http://www.edweek.org/sreports/qc04/state.cfm?slug=17ia.h23>).

¹⁶ But these progressive education movements were short-lived, in part, because they were financed by corporate foundations who then pulled the plug on funding when they found no more use for these movements as safety valves for the pain they were causing by fundamentally restructuring the system at the time. The current small schools movement, because it has been taken over by a corporate foundation, also risks being shut down once the current transformation of the school system into its new tracking system is complete. This is the thesis of one of my qualification papers, which you can read online at http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/Emery/Emery_AltSchoolsPaper.htm

¹⁷ I do not make this characterization lightly. In the last 20 years, the prison population has doubled. Jean Anyon argues that from 1984-96 the ratio of those needing to work to the number of jobs available has been five to one. The biggest job categories in the U.S. increasingly are not paying a living-wage. Blaming teachers and the students themselves for the increasing number of pushouts in public schools justifies the growing numbers of people in service sector jobs and a thriving prison system. The current scapegoating of immigrants can also be seen as a manifestation of stress caused by the fundamental transformation of the U.S economy into a service economy during the last twenty years.

¹⁸ A satire of BRT policy by an Indiana Public School Superintendent makes it plain that the superintendent believes the old status quo was fundamentally sound. He writes a fake news story from the future:

In a press conference on March 21, 2035, a Business Roundtable member, said, “It was so deceptive to think that all we needed to do was to hold students and schools accountable with high stakes testing. We had no idea at the time there was a downside to excessive testing. We just wanted to be the best in the world. Who would have known that one reason America led the world in the creation of new ideas, was that schools taught an eclectic combination of content with surprising creativity and hands-on-instruction. It evidently developed students into creative, yet productive citizens that developed products and services that the entire world sought after. Or at least it used to. Compared to other countries, we had one of the most comprehensive curriculums in the world. We had no idea that the Art, Music, PE, Health, Social Studies and Athletics all contributed to the rich, comprehensive broad-based backgrounds that actually promoted creativity and independent thought. The simple, but deceptive idea that most of what is important in school can be measured by a one-shot standardized test was too much for us to pass up.” <http://thesupersblog.blogspot.com/2005/03/business-roundtable-issues-national.html> viewed July 24, 2006.

¹⁹ Anyon argues in her book (2005) that “macroeconomic policies like those regulating the minimum wage, job availability, tax rates, federal transportation, and affordable housing create conditions in cities that no existing educational policy or urban school reform can transcend (p.2).”

Educational reform cannot succeed without a change in these macroeconomic policies that will not be changed except “by the power of a people who are united and organized” (p. 4).

²⁰ See Polly Greenberg’s *The Devil Has Slippery Shoes* (1969) for a case study of how Johnson’s Office of Economic Opportunity co-opted the civil rights movement. See FDR’s biography in Richard Hofstadter’s *The American Political Tradition* (1989) for a description of how the New Deal successfully co-opted the labor movement of the 1930s.

²¹ Industrial Areas Foundation, Pacific Institute of Community Organizations, and Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, respectively.

²² You can view information about the San Francisco Freedom School at http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/ED_SFFS.html

²³ You can view the entire original 1964 Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum at http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/ED_FSC.html

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