

**Book Review Symposium:** Howard Ryan with Debra Goodman, Joel Jordan, and Joseph Zeccola (2016), *Educational Justice: Teaching and Organizing against the Corporate Juggernaut*. New York: Monthly Review. ISBN 98-1583676141 (paperback, also available in hardback and e-book).

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The troubling history of literacy teaching and learning in the U.S. – a history shaped by systemic racism and ongoing injustice - is too often obscured in curricula, teacher’s guides, professional development opportunities, and university courses that present literacy acquisition as a neutral, apolitical endeavor (Street, 1984). Yet, the denial of basic literacy skills to slaves (Douglass, 1845/2013), the literacy “tests” of the Jim Crow era that denied voting rights to African-Americans (Alexander, 2012), the insidious connection between reading comprehension exams and the eugenics movement (Willis, 2007), and the expansion of corporate, scripted literacy curricula that

disproportionately target poor communities and undermine teacher autonomy (Au, 2011), collectively illustrate the ways in which literacy has historically functioned as a tool of oppression in U.S. society.

As problematic as this legacy is, it also points to the power of literacy to foment social change. The tremendous effort undertaken to deny literacy to subordinated groups speaks to its power. Literacy, then, can be mobilized to foster critical consciousness, alter current conditions, and create a new set of empowering and equitable spaces. However, even as literacy advocates, teachers, scholars and others recognize the ways in which reading and writing can center social justice, large-scale change remains elusive and movements that harbor the most promise - whole language (Edelsky, 2006), hip hop literacies (Love, 2015), ethnic studies (Camarota & Romero, 2014), queer theory (Miller, 2016), and digital literacies (Mirra & Garcia, 2017) – often remain on the margins.

As Howard Ryan (2016) demonstrates in his provocative and hopeful text, *Educational Justice: Teaching and Organizing Against the Corporate Juggernaut*, organizing for change is central to our role as literacy educators in “these times” (Lytle, 2006). Teachers not only need to collaborate to reclaim agency and autonomy in their classrooms, but must also work diligently to protect the critical dimensions of literacy initiatives as specific movements enter the mainstream and gain popular support. Without concerted efforts to preserve the radical origins of promising literacy endeavors, these endeavors run the risk of becoming diluted, co-opted by corporations, and subsequently dismissed by the public as ineffectual (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Given this overarching context, I frame this essay as a response to Ryan’s text by drawing out salient themes related to literacy organizing as evident in two of

his chapters- *Critical Literacy*, *Democratic Schools and the Whole Language Movement* by Debra Goodman and *Teacher Solidarity Beats Scripted Instruction*. By looking closely at these two chapters individually and examining elements that cut across both examples, I consider the importance of 1) Recognizing the insidious origins of “reading research” 2) Initiating change from the ground up 3) Cultivating relationships and collective will 4) Naming and maintaining the radical and critical contours of promising literacy movements and 5) Identifying and disseminating images of the possible. I contextualize these ideas within and against current literacy movements in the U.S. that possess the potential to reshape practices in schools and address longstanding inequities in U.S. education

### **Questioning the logic of reading research**

Ryan’s text begins with a theoretical overview of school reform and the ways in which neoliberalism- or what he refers to as “hyper-capitalism” - has drastically re-shaped educational realities across the United States as market forces and corporate interests have infiltrated nearly every sector of schooling and society. Notions of individualism, meritocracy, and accountability are so pervasive in the U.S. that they now operate invisibly and hegemonically as an implicit logic upon that undergirds educational policy at every level. While Ryan utilizes the first several chapters to frame the theoretical assumptions underpinning neoliberalism and to expose the vast amounts of corporate dollars which are funneled into neoliberal endeavors, through specific examples throughout the text, he also illustrates the ways in which neoliberalism is lived and felt in particular spaces (Stern & Brown, 2016), one of which is the literacy classroom.

Although neoliberalism has been shaping schools and school reform since the 1970s, the National Reading Panel (NRP) Report (2000) laid the groundwork for the encroachment of corporate reading programs into elementary literacy

classrooms. The report, which claimed to provide scientific evidence for the importance of the 5 pillars of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension) in classroom instruction, was leveraged by George W. Bush into the creation of the Reading First initiative which comprised a key turning point in the widespread adoption and implementation of scripted reading programs across the U.S. Mandated as a part of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Reading First allocated nearly 5 billion federal dollars to improving early reading instruction in Title 1 schools by using scripted reading programs that focused almost exclusively on the five pillars of “scientific reading instruction.” By all accounts, Reading First failed to produce gains in reading achievement across a five-year period (Institute of Education Sciences, 2008; Shannon, 2014). Rather, a primary beneficiary of Reading First legislation was the Bush family who had a financial stake in the corporate reading programs, which schools were required to adopt (Roche, 2006). Moreover, literacy scholars have critiqued the NRP report both for the limited range of studies they utilized in compiling the report (only 500 out of nearly 100,000) as well as the possible motives of the legislation in supporting corporate interests in education (Coles, 2003). Unfortunately, a majority of classrooms now operate on the ideological assumption that “scientifically-based” reading instruction is will dramatically improve reading achievement across populations in the U.S.

In Ryan’s chapter on Soto Elementary School in Los Angeles, he recounts the sense of hopelessness that teachers experience when they are confronted with “reading research” and required to adopt a corporate reading program- in this case, Open Court – a program that involves reading from a script verbatim rather than applying contextualized expertise or knowledge to create learning experiences that respond effectively to the needs of their students. Although these interventions have been widely discredited- a point that Ryan highlights

throughout the text- their legacies have been both far-reaching and difficult to dismantle. As Debra Goodman notes in her chapter on the Whole Language Movement, Whole Language has always been about centering students' lived experiences and teacher expertise, elements that made the movement inherently threatening to reformers who sought to commodify and profit from literacy instruction.

### **Initiating change from the ground up**

In documenting how teachers at Soto Elementary and those within the Whole Language network worked together to create space for meaningful literary engagements among students, Ryan offers several clear lessons for effective social justice organizing.

Specifically, efforts towards transformation at Soto occurred from the ground up and started not just with the frustration of the staff at having to implement Open Court but with the efforts of one teacher who saw the potential of initiating balanced literacy approaches within the school and took strategic steps in order to actualize this vision. Although the teachers' were seeking to shift from scripted programs to more teacher-driven approaches which included Balanced Literacy, they were careful not to simply replace one top-down approach with another and were, instead, cognizant of the importance of interpreting balanced literacy broadly and considering a range of iterations in its application. By holding onto the grassroots dimensions of their efforts, the teachers were able to ensure that they were not simply replicating the same problems they were seeking to disrupt. For example, the teachers avoided locking students into strict reading levels and instead supported their curiosities by creating libraries that incorporated a wide range of texts to pique their interest. The movement stayed rooted in the teachers' classrooms and remained responsive to their needs and concerns as educators.

Similarly, as Goodman notes in her chapter, the Whole Language movement originated in complementary ways from the will of concerned teachers seeking to resist basal readers and to position themselves as empowered professionals within the field of literacy teaching and learning. The informal meetings and collective action that comprised the contours of the Whole Language movement in the 1980s and 1990s was fundamental in defining it as a movement designed by and created for educators seeking to enrich their practice, respond to their students' needs, and foster meaningful and sustained engagements with texts. Of course, these examples are not isolated incidents as the history of the U.S. is rife with examples of how groups have united in organic and strategic ways to generate change on broader scales (Weiler, 1991). But these instances (and others in Ryan's text) serve as important reminders that change is possible and large movements, like Whole Language, grow out of small, localized instances of change.

### **Cultivating relationships and collective will**

Integral to grassroots efforts at promoting change is collaboration and collective will, notions that were leveraged by teachers in both literacy chapters in Ryan's text. Recognizing that change could not be sustained by one individual, Beaudet, a teacher at Soto Elementary who proposed introducing balanced literacy, quickly sought to generate alliances with her colleagues as well as with parents, outside networks and organizations, local unions and the school principal, who was initially hostile to her efforts. This kind of organizing directly counters the tenets of neoliberalism which imply that change can and does happen on an individual basis (Crawford-Garrett, 2017) – a notion that promulgates troubling messages when individual students fail and teachers struggle to improve test scores in the face of complex societal issues like racism, endemic poverty, healthcare disparities, affordable housing crises, etc.

By instead positioning collective will and collaboration as fundamental to sustaining change for the long-term, teachers can disrupt neoliberal paradigms and create a network of support among universities, families, funders, and other teachers that possess the potential to transcend some of the obstacles currently facing teachers and students.

Debra Goodman recounts a parallel phenomenon within the teacher support groups within the Whole Language Movement that acted as sites of democratic learning, meaningful collaboration and authentic teacher research as teachers worked together to generate and share knowledge about the teaching of reading and writing in their classrooms. Teachers in each example utilized Freirean notions of the collective in the interest of invoking change. Freire (1970) emphasized the role of communion among individuals in fostering critical consciousness. In essence, “social justice is a process that is best supported and enhanced by a collective of individuals with a shared commitment to transforming society” (Navarro, 2018, p. 340).

### **Naming and maintaining radical and critical contours of literacy movements**

Both of the case studies of literacy organizing that Ryan documents in his text illustrate the ongoing struggle to name and maintain the critical origins of their respective projects, a challenge that potentially compromises each movement’s overall effectiveness. Goodman, for example, shares in detail the ways in which Whole Language became a buzzword as teachers adopted the program and claimed to be implementing it without the attention to the serious study, critical inquiry, praxis, and intellectual commitment that Whole Language requires. As publishers keyed into the growing popularity of the movement, they created materials that sought to capitalize on the widespread appeal – efforts that contradicted the essence of the Whole Language teaching and learning, which

was, by design, student-driven and predicated on the unique, contextualized knowledge of educators. Although each literacy movement- the macro-level Whole language movement and the micro-level initiative at Soto- was driven by social justice theory and practice, these dimensions were either not explicitly named (in the case of Soto) or lost in translation (in the case of Whole Language). Naming is central to critical approaches within education as the process of transforming the world is contingent on our ability to name the structures that oppress us (Janks, 2014).

### **Identifying images of the possible**

Along with explicitly naming the critical dimensions of literacy initiatives in an effort to maintain their radical underpinnings, identifying and documenting tangible examples of these kinds of programs is foundational to creating a shared vision for lasting change. Cultivating and disseminating these “images of the possible” is especially essential in urban schools and/or high-poverty contexts where neoliberal logic dictates that challenging and creative curricula will prove ineffectual and poor students need a back-to-basics approach to learning (Anyon, 1980; Haberman, 1991). Several current movements within literacy offer explicit examples and tangible images of how literacy practices and pedagogies might be mobilized to reshape schooling. In addition to Whole Language, which is extensively theorized in Ryan’s book, Hip-Hop Literacies have garnered momentum as scholars and teachers theorize the ways in which utilizing these approaches in schools and classrooms might create curricula that is more responsive to students’ lived realities and cultural ways of being and knowing. Morrell (2007), for example, illustrates how hip hop texts can be paired with traditional poetry in secondary English classrooms to leverage robust understandings of the canon and to advance academic competencies. Love (2015) contends that the integration of Hip-Hop-Based Education into

elementary education and early childhood spaces can build upon the communities of practice in which urban youth are already situated. Similarly, ethnic studies initiatives, as exemplified in the Tucson Mexican-American studies program, which was dismantled by the state of Arizona, offers a concrete example of how literacies that foster critical consciousness can contribute to significant academic gains among historically-marginalized youth (Camarota & Romero, 2014). Still others document the importance of digital literacies in fostering civic engagement among youth and serving as an incubator for ideas, creativity, and activism (Vasudevan, Schultz & Bateman, 2010; Mirra & Garcia, 2017). Lastly, Miller (2016) and others have illustrated the transformative potential of centering queer theory and queer literacies in secondary English classrooms. Notably, all of these aforementioned movements are grounded in critical theory and all share the risk of being co-opted and/or encountering fierce opposition as they gain momentum and expand in reach and scope. These practices are undeniably promising and possess tremendous potential; yet their radical roots must be maintained as advocates call for their expansion.

## **Conclusion**

Literacy has long been a contested site where ideological battles play out as differently positioned actors seek to define “justice” and “equity” within literacy teaching and learning. While neoliberals continue to co-opt social justice terminology as they argue for curricula and pedagogies that standardize instruction and promote corporate materials, critical literacy advocates and practitioners must strategically utilize the lessons from Ryan’s text to build a movement that maintains its radical elements while advocating for educational change. Specifically, movements currently operating in isolation must build a sense of collective will as they advance new images and new understandings of what literacy teaching and learning can be in these times. Learning from and

with one another in the interest of promoting literacy instruction that build on students' robust knowledge bases and recognize the value of teachers' expertise is central to the goal of creating equitable public education for all students.

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A combative generation of teachers has come to the fore across the USA. In Chicago and Los Angeles, Oklahoma and West Virginia, strike action has seen teachers defeat the expansion of charter schools (akin to academy schools in England), win pay rises, and thwart the implementation of reactionary reforms. Crucial to this mobilisation has been an approach to union organising based on two essentials: active commitment to social movement perspectives, and recognition of the power to be wielded by a mass workers' movement.

Howard Ryan offers a sure-footed account of the background to renewed rank-and-file combativity in the US public education system. He explores the two big questions that militancy raises, namely what does the union stand for, and how is it to be led? His book presents detailed narratives of grass-roots victories, along with an explicitly class-based analysis of the broader context in which these have been won. Ryan understands this context as shaped by the 'corporate occupation' (p. 10) of education in schools, which he characterises as an 'assault' (p. 12). Many of these corporate-driven 'reforms' will be familiar to teachers in the UK. They include an externally-imposed 'standards' agenda drawn up without the participation of those most affected; high stakes testing and a drive to raise attainment by data-driven teaching; the restructuring of

educational services in ways which facilitate privatisation; and further weakening of education workers' job security and professional voice.

In the face of such an assault, Ryan scrutinises the failure of 'partnership' trade unionism, whose hallmark is the too-ready willingness of union leaders to make deals rather than mobilise members. Such an approach, the legacy of a series of industrial, ideological and political defeats, has 'aligned the two major national teacher organisations with corporate interests' (p. 12). The alternative to so compromised an alignment combines a more militant stance founded on a class struggle perspective with a vision of democratic school transformation and wider social justice.

Concrete evidence that this alternative strategy can win for teachers, students and communities is provided by four case-studies. Powerful first-hand accounts trace the development among practitioners of communities of practice, and witness the strength and solidarity which flows when teachers exercise their informed professionalism in conjunction with community mobilisation. Ryan explores the way the dynamic interaction of school and community can bolster working-class students against a pervasive deficit-model which asserts they cannot succeed and which helps reproduce existing inequalities. 'Public education', he notes, 'is fundamentally about democracy, equipping young people with skills for effective citizenship and participation' (p. 16).

It is refreshing to read a text which is clear about what it stands for, as well as what it stands against. Democracy is a watchword in any struggle for educational justice predicated on grass-roots self-organising and collective mobilisation. Together with 'resistance' and 'transformation', Ryan calls 'democracy' a conceptual tool or paradigm to help 'reflect upon the project of education organising' (p. 16). This paradigm will have implications for

pedagogy, curriculum and resourcing, as well as for the conduct of industrial struggle in the education sector. John Dewey, exploring 'the democratic conception in education' a century ago in his great work *Democracy and Education*, noted that:

It is not enough to see to it that education is not actively used as an instrument to make easier the exploitation of one class by another. School facilities must be secured of such amplitude and efficiency as will in fact and not simply in name discount the effects of economic inequality, and secure to all the wards of the nation equality of equipment for their future careers. Accomplishment of this end demands not only adequate administrative provision of school facilities... but also such modification of traditional ideas of culture, traditional ideas of study and traditional methods of teaching and discipline as will retain all youth under educational influences until they are equipped to be masters of their own economic and social careers... (Dewey, 1997, p.104)

Ryan calls out the anti-democratic bent of corporate school 'reform'. One essential aim of the currently-dominant policies has been 'to squelch democracy by converting schools into centres of obedience training for working-class youth.' (p. 18) In opposing such 'reform', teachers find they must also work to democratise their union, so that it becomes an instrument which serves this necessary opposition.

Early chapters outline the current context facing those who work and learn in public education in the US. Ryan notes how huge corporations (those recognisable as edu-businesses, but not only those) have increasingly involved themselves in education policy over recent decades. Technology companies and real estate investors, as well as the likes of Pearson, have seen opportunities to make money out of public schooling. Those ideologically committed to rolling back the public sector have clustered too. Ryan acknowledges a racist

dimension to the effects of policy in the US, while arguing that for the fullest analysis an understanding of the salience of class is central. He suggests that education-policy has been driven by the best funded capitalist agents: corporations, quangos, and charitable foundations set up by venture capitalists. Politicians and business round-tables have prepared the ground for the resulting 'reforms', and school administrators have worked to implement them. The tenor of these reforms is to reject a view of teaching and learning as nuanced and complex work, always necessarily provisional, in favour of an approach which lauds efficiency and might even be scriptable. Critical thinking has been marginalised; compliance and obedience drastically over-valued.

In tandem with this analysis, Ryan proffers a potent critique of trade union leadership wedded to a 'service model' approach which, as it were, contracts out the work of a union to its cadre of officials, bureaucratising rather than democratising the union. Instead of seeing ourselves as the union, we talk about the union doing something 'for' us. Such a way of thinking positions union members as clients rather than agents. It encourages deal-making at the top table, 'conceding not leading' in the words of Joel Jordan, and enables those such as Bill Gates whose interests run fundamentally counter to the interests of workers, to give money to the union and so wield influence in it.

This kind of 'partnership unionism' enables rank and file opposition to the corporate reform agenda to be more or less readily set aside. At local level, the whittling away of pay and conditions begins to look unstoppable. In his chapter, Joel Jordan introduces a further degree of complexity, recognising that a service model approach doesn't entirely preclude a trade union from taking action. But the marked division of perspective between state level union representatives and their counterparts at local level closest to the sharp edge of so-called reforms undermines resistance, or dilutes it. Those most directly and

detrimentally affected by the impact corporate reforms make on teachers' working lives and conditions of service too often go unheeded. Their potential to take action is left untapped.

But where members refuse to be ignored by their union's leadership, and instead organise and mobilise against corporate 'reforms', they can create new conditions and achieve victories. Several chapters in the book offer case-studies in which such an approach has borne fruit, if only temporarily, for individual schools and their communities. We learn how teachers at the Jacob Beidler Elementary School in Chicago successfully fought off incorporation into a charter school. Incorporation would have handed public assets to the private company running the charter school, forced students to travel across gang-territory to be educated in a new and unfamiliar school, and made teachers re-apply for jobs with no guarantee they would again be hired. Elsewhere in the city a principal's bullying and budget-cutting was successfully resisted thanks to local union leadership which took a stand. They organised on the ground, kept members informed, held regular accessible meetings, and told the truth about the situation to teachers, governors and parents.

Growth in militancy at local level generates new leaders who can rise to wider prominence through union structures. The Chicago Teachers Union has renewed its leadership in recent years, and mobilised strongly among the rank and file as a result. This in turn allows for the emergence of a more integrated vision of democratic public education as part of an anti-cuts political outlook. The positive vision of society which must be part of such an outlook is less precisely elaborated on here.

Perhaps inevitably in a parti-authored text which mixes theoretical analysis and strategic overview with case-study narrative and reflections on pedagogy, some

material is repeated when individual struggles are put into context. A more significant drawback for readers in the UK may be lack of familiarity with the structure, administration and funding of the US public school system, and with the history and workings of the US teaching unions. I found my ignorance in these areas did not stop me from following the main arguments in the book, nor prevent my learning from the case studies. The set of detailed end-notes which accompanies each chapter is a bonus. These give further information, ballast key points with facts and figures, and offer a wealth of follow-up reading.

The context for education in England can appear broadly similar to that in the US. We too are confined as yet by high stakes testing, enforced phonics teaching, the drive to increase the number of academies, and the slow colonisation by edu-business of what supposedly counts as legitimate in matters of curriculum and aspects of pedagogy. But there are major differences to be kept in mind. The governance and funding of English schools evidently differs significantly from the US system. General education policy-making here is entirely centralised, and the opportunity to secure grant funding for professional development, which Ryan's book shows US teachers making good use of, scarcely exists. Union structures also differ markedly.

However, the diagnosis offered in the Afterword carries a message for activists in the UK. As well as underscoring the need to connect a local dispute to the broader political picture of corporate assault on public education, and consequently the need to have a countervailing big picture (for example of a fully comprehensive national education service), Ryan advocates school-based community organising as a way to amplify the power teachers and parents/carers possess. He further argues the necessity for teacher unions to involve themselves sustainedly in arguments over curriculum. The two case studies set in Los Angeles show teachers collaborating to make best use of

whatever available space and agency they retain within their settings in order to offer 'living alternatives' to what has been termed 'the pedagogy of poverty' (p. 208). This is a regimented drill-based approach to teaching, in particular the teaching of reading, which corporate reformers see as necessary for children from impoverished backgrounds, on whom generosity of provision and creative pedagogical approaches need not be wasted.

I would include pedagogy and assessment matters alongside those to do with curriculum. Debra Goodman's chapter about the 'whole language' movement, is pertinent. Goodman's parents helped inaugurate this particular approach to what is too readily termed 'literacy'. She values the movement not only for its efficacy in helping children learn to read and write, but also because it empowers practitioners and enables them to support each other beyond their own workplaces, for example by joining dedicated networks which have a nationwide span.

'Whole language' approaches still persist, though the movement's heyday ran from the 1970s until the early 1990s. 'Whole language' stands against those approaches which reduce reading and writing merely to familiarisation with, and control of, a sequence of skills. Rather, 'whole language' embeds reading and writing 'in meaningful and purposeful activities... [and gives children] significant input in relation to pictures, texts, materials and schedules.' (p 158) Above all, the 'whole language' approach recognises individual learners as already makers of meaning, and encourages them to relate what they already know of text and the world to the new materials encountered in school. As the drive to streamline 'literacy' has taken hold, the idea of meaning as complex, contestable and constructed has been supplanted by a view which sees meaning as singular, pre-existent in the text only, and always readily available to be

found. This in turn has licensed the use of simplistic right/wrong testing as a way to gauge reading 'competence' and development.

Goodman is alert to the way a carefully-developed context-sensitive pedagogic approach, respectful of the complexities of any teaching encounter, can be turned into a fad or fashion and hence rendered liable to commodification and co-option by the powers-that-be, or, by being shallowly understood, mis-employed with the best intentions. A feature of top-down approaches to teaching-and-learning in England has been the succession of such faddish bandwagons, occasionally boosted as 'what works', which arrive in schools like playground crazes and last about as long. Sustained support for patient shared discussion and collaboration among teachers themselves, predicated on and fostering informed reflection on principled practice, would be a far more beneficial way forward. But that model entirely undermines the version of public education encouraged by edu-businesses and Ryan's corporates, and willingly acceded to by ministers.

Where co-option fails, a discourse of derision and discredit may succeed. Goodman details the backlash orchestrated by interest-groups, policy-makers and business leaders against 'whole language' approaches. Tactics employed to generate the discourse required to counter an alternative practice and its ideology (one that is successful, and so potentially insurgent) echo those used by phonics fundamentalists in England's 'reading wars', or by partisans of segregated education against the comprehensive school movement. They testify to the significance of what is at stake. Goodman is surely right to conclude that '... discussion of language pedagogy remains extremely critical today, in an era when reading-evaluated through high stakes tests-is a focal point in corporate attacks on teachers and public schools.' (p. 185)

Her words resonate in a country whose government insists on imposing a baseline test of children as they enter the education system, mandates a pointless 'phonics check', and continues to advocate one sole approach to the teaching of reading, against widespread professional and academic opposition. Such disempowering of practitioners cries out for serious and sustained counter-action on the part of teacher unions. While the leadership of England's new National Education Union speaks a language of 'social movement unionism' which Ryan would recognise, how far such language is put into practice remains as ever a matter for contest and struggle.

Take the issue of high-stakes testing. Ryan argues against a boycott of such testing in the US. His view is that tests will only be replaced by something as bad, if not worse. He advocates 'a multi-issue perspective' (p. 251). He may be right in the US context, but in England such testing has for a long time directly damaged the conditions of education for children by narrowing the curriculum they are offered, by enforcing teach-the test approaches, and by fuelling 'datafication', the process by which the individuality of the whole child as a learner is effaced, and each child come to be regarded and spoken of in terms of their test-scores. That NEU activists struggle to get effective test-boycott action debated inside their union is hard to stomach.

On a more positive note, among the organised groupings within the NEU, the Education Solidarity Network in particular remains focused on a militant rank-and-file approach to industrial issues, and to organising and mobilising more intensively for action than the current leadership. Their approach would seem to have much in common with that advocated in Ryan's timely, accessible and heartening book.

## **Reference**

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Howard Ryan's book, *Educational Justice: Teaching and Organizing against the Corporate Juggernaut*, identifies the forces of corporate education reform currently playing out in our public schools. Ryan also describes in vivid detail the strategies used by the federal government that began to label schools and teachers as "failures" and provided a pathway to the privatization of our public schools. Howard ends the book by chronicling the organizing work of parents and teachers to fight against these forces. This article looks at how these forces affected New Mexico's public schools, the response from parents and teachers, and where we go from here.

## **Strategies to take over public schools**

In the book's Foreword, Ryan clearly outlines the aims of national corporate school reform beginning with the 1983 Reagan administration report, *A Nation At Risk*, and leading to the creation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy in 2002. Under the new federal guidelines of NCLB, the role of standardized tests in public education changed dramatically. Prior to NCLB, most states required students to take a standardized test at 4th and 8th grade. Many states developed these tests, with teacher input, around the state standards. NCLB law increased administration of these tests to include 3rd and 5th grades in

elementary school, 6th and 7th grades in middle school and one year in high school. The new federal testing requirements necessitated the amount of time spent in classrooms preparing for and administering standardized tests from a few days to multiple weeks annually.

Instructional time and curriculum were profoundly impacted by the new accountability system and its federal testing requirements. Many schools mandated that teachers use instructional time throughout the year to prepare their students for the annual test. Districts were encouraged to purchase test prep materials that were “conveniently” written and sold by textbook companies who also published the annual standardized tests. Curriculums were narrowed and focused on Math and Reading, the only two subjects that counted in the federal accountability system. This marked the beginning of the “high stakes” standards-based education and assessment accountability system that is currently in place and is at the heart of the assault on public schools.

Federal guidelines that were packaged and sold as an accountability system were used to reinforce and formalize corporate strategies to take over public schools. The NCLB Law detailed a mandated accountability system to ensure the reforms were followed and in agonizing detail described consequences if they were not. One of the most exacting and fantastical NCLB demands was that ALL children be proficient in Reading and Math by the year 2013-2014. Other mandates in the law were; 95% of all students in every school take an annual test created by the state, every school must show “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) in every demographic subgroup annually as evidenced by student scores, and the AYP results of every school must be publicized.

The law outlined the consequences for schools when they did not achieve AYP. NCLB stated that parents could transfer their child from a school not making AYP to one that was. In Albuquerque, schools not making AYP were mandated

to hire tutoring companies in Math and Reading often replacing rich after school programs. Each year that a school did not make AYP, consequences became more punitive. Schools would be inspected and observed by the New Mexico Department of Public Education (NMPED), ordered to write detailed Educational Plans of School Success detailing anticipated percentage growth in test scores of demographic groups, and put on rigid “turnaround programs” from consultants hired outside New Mexico. The ultimate punishment was that a school could be closed, taken over by the state, or given over to a charter organization. This punitive accountability system incentivized the establishment of charter schools and voucher systems, the explosive growth of for-profit standardized test publishers, and eventually, the creation and implementation of the more “rigorous” Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

In New Mexico, NCLB annual testing requirements, as well as the mandate to publicly announce the results of these tests, helped bolster the message that our schools were “Failing”. Each school’s demographic groups, divided by income level, ethnicity, and Special Education, had to make AYP annually. According to NCLB, if even one group did not make AYP, then the entire school did not make “growth”. Growth was based on a student having improved their scores of the annual standardized test from one year to the next. Evidence that our schools were “failing” was provided annually to families in the form of high stakes test results published in our local newspapers and district websites. The growth of charter schools was a response to the strident call of corporate education reformers that families needed a “choice” out of the vast majority of schools who were not making the impossible annual growth that NCLB mandated. Students who attended a school that did not make AYP were given the option to attend a school that was “achieving” (making AYP). During the NCLB era only a small handful of the over 130 Albuquerque schools would ever make AYP.

Test-based school and teacher accountability was introduced by NCLB then enforced and individualized by state education departments. When it became increasingly apparent that the perpetual growth model of AYP was not sustainable nor that ALL children would be proficient in Reading and Math, the Federal Government allowed states to apply for waivers out of the NCLB. To opt out, states would still have to substantiate to the Federal Government that they were holding teachers and schools accountable using test-based measures. New Mexico's newly elected Republican administration responded with elaborate, complex teacher evaluation and school grading systems, both fueled by test scores of their students.

On every level, the accountability system set out by NCLB was a disaster across the nation for community schools, the teaching profession, and curricula. Many schools that were labeled as failing in the accountability system were closed. Most of these schools were located in communities of color and in high poverty neighborhoods. Teachers began leaving the profession in droves due to the increasing lack of autonomy in their work, the stigma of being labeled as an ineffective teacher due to their students' test scores and being mandated to use standards based, scripted, "teacher-proof" textbook programs in Math and Reading. K-12 Curricula was starved of ethnic studies, history, civics and the Arts while being burdened with massive doses of the tested subjects of Math and Reading. This epic failure did not stop the US Department of Education from replacing NCLB with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. ESSA, a law of over 1000 pages, continues to institutionalize a test-based accountability system with a mandated summative yearly assessment being given to students.

School reform and federal test-based accountability were fortified by the formation of the Common Core Standards, CCCS, adopted by almost all states

around 2010. Before the onset of the CCSS, states wrote their own standards, developed assessments around these standards, and implemented them within their state. The CCSS completely changed the premise of state-based standards and replaced it with the urgency that every state needed to have the same, high, “rigorous” standards. The enormous effort in building and then implementing a set of national standards was funded in large part by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, as well as for-profit textbook publishers and edu-tech companies. The national standards were touted as being deeper and more rigorous in content and would have the power “if teachers implemented it correctly”, for our students to “keep pace”, “compete in a global economy” and “outperform” other countries. The CCSS was drenched in a heavy corporate reform voice with no actual teachers participating in its writing. It was never piloted before being presented to states for adoption.

At the same time the CCSS were being written, for-profit publishers were crafting new “21st Century” assessments that would allegedly be able to test children on their mastery of the new standards. This idea was also groundbreaking as states, now taking the same assessments on the same standards, could be compared to each other. The consortiums writing the online assessments for the new standards failed to pilot their product yet claimed this new, on-line technology would be “cutting-edge “in its ability to accurately measure student mastery of the CCSS. Their claims have yet to be proven.

The current batch of standardized tests were created by textbook corporations to support the coerced implementation of CCSS and have been directly linked in many states to teacher evaluations and school letter grades. Student’s test scores in the areas of Reading and Math are now used to label teachers and schools as “achieving success” or “failing”. These simplistic labels are given to complex communities based on student standardized test scores. This data gives states

the power to determine a school's success or failure without ever having to step onto the campus, observe teachers, meet students, or interact with the community. It also ignores any holistic approaches teachers and schools adopt such as culturally relevant literature, music and art that engage and enrich student learning. They have served as a way to weaponize student test scores in labeling schools as failing and teachers as not effective.

Publishers of these tests have not been held accountable for the reliability or validity, of their tests in measuring student's actual abilities in Mathematics or Reading. This is especially true in regard to English Language Learners and students with processing issues or specific learning disabilities. While many of these students have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), administration guidelines for the new tests required these plans to be rewritten in order to align with test publishers' own requirements for test administration. There is also no accountability as to the implicit cultural & linguistic bias that are present within these tests. For example, students living in Albuquerque were required to read passages about ships, subways and lawns.

In New Mexico, a mostly rural state, the PARCC is administered online. Apart from the financial burden created by the need for a robust tech-based infrastructure to accomplish this, testing students on-line is problematic. Students are challenged may not comprehend complex or lengthy text when read digitally as compared to reading a hard copy version. The "21st Century" PARCC Reading tests tasked students to compare and contrast between several different texts. This requires the ability to navigate between multiple screens, highlight text via keyboard strokes, and compose a constructed response with a character limit. As schools learned of the technology of the high stakes tests, time in computer lab was dominated with teaching children how to manipulate the keyboard to be able to respond to test questions.

By evaluating and grading teachers and schools on these new standards and testing methods, corporate education reform reinforced by law have been able to manufacture a narrative of failing public schools that has profited corporate interests. The accountability system fails to ask what our children *should* be learning in our public schools and instead focuses on preparing students to score well on high stakes tests in Reading and Math.

### **Evolution of Corporate Reform in New Mexico Public Schools**

New Mexico is mostly rural, culturally rich and economically poor. It celebrates a varied and lovely geography, enjoys four mild arid seasons and has a robust history of brutal colonization. Quite often, people ignorant of our rich story come to New Mexico imagining they can fix our economy, while plundering our resources of land and people. In 2010, New Mexico elected Republican Governor Susana Martinez, an aggressive “tough on crime” prosecuting attorney who spent most of her career in Texas. From the beginning of her term, Governor Martinez stated that she would disrupt the “status quo” of our “failing” schools and would aggressively “fix” the problem. This mantra was common among school reformers across the country. She immediately nominated a Secretary to head our Public Education Department, Hannah Skandera.

Skandera had the perfect qualifications to initiate and implement corporate school reforms. She had just finished a successful run in Florida’s Department of Education, a leader in the country’s destructive public school reform. Florida earned this distinction under the leadership of Governor Jeb Bush who also served on the Foundation for Educational Excellence, or FEE. The Washington Post reported on the work of FEE in 2015:

“The foundation has, for instance, pushed states to embrace digital learning in public schools, a costly transition that often requires new software and hardware. Many of those digital products are made by donors to Bush’s foundation, including Microsoft, Intel, News Corp., Pearson PLC and K12 Inc. But the foundation, from which Bush resigned as chairman last week as part of his preparations for a possible White House bid, has been criticized as a backdoor vehicle for major corporations to urge state officials to adopt policies that would enrich the companies.” (Layton, 2015)

Skandera had previously earned high marks from corporate reformers and Florida’s state public education Department for: promoting school choice, the administration of annual high stakes tests, implementing school letter grades, and 3rd grade retention for students who scored low on publishing company generated Reading tests. Governor Martinez desired all the Florida reforms and more for New Mexico even though none of these reforms were shown to improve public schools or support children. What these reforms *did* accomplish was being a boon to publishing company profits, charter school growth, and education consulting businesses.

Skandera came into New Mexico with guns ablazing. She boldly promoted and then implemented a school letter-grades policy. This was sold on the promise that school letter grades were a transparent way for families to determine the value of schools in their neighborhoods. School grades-were initially determined by children’s scores on the New Mexico Standards Based Assessment (NMSBA) test, published at a profit by McGraw Hill, which also had a contract for textbooks aligned to the test. In 2014, New Mexico adopted the Partnership of Assessment for Readiness of College and Career, PARCC, published by Pearson, Inc. The decision to change tests may have come from the fact that Hannah Skandera served on the PARCC Board of Directors. After adoption, New Mexico began using the highly controversial statistical model, Value Added Method, VAM. This complex statistical model has been highly

criticized for its lack of validity and reliability by a majority of mathematicians and statisticians across the country.

A new, draconian, online, test score dependent teacher evaluation system was the next step in New Mexico's school accountability plan. This system used a combination of student test scores, school grades, number of days absent, and principal observations to evaluate teachers. Teachers were rated from "exemplary" to "ineffective" using a complex formula that based 50% of the total score on the test scores of their students. Teachers rated minimally effective or lower were barred from applying for certain positions and encountered barriers when applying to move tiers or renew their license. This was a large factor in creating the existing teacher shortage in New Mexico as many veteran educators chose to leave the profession rather than work under these harsh and demoralizing policies. Recently, New Mexico elected a Democratic, pro-public education governor who is actively working to undo the punitive policies the Martinez-Skandera administration imposed on the state. Public school educators, higher education faculty and New Mexico students are hopeful for a new, student-driven vision for New Mexico. Adding to this optimism is the recent ruling by Judge Singleton in the Martinez-Yazzie lawsuit, which found the state in violation of the state constitution and supports bilingual education for students.

### **Local resistance and organizing work**

In his book, Ryan describes how teachers organized with parents against principals, union leadership and corporate reform efforts in Chicago and Los Angeles to tackle these, and other problems, in their own communities. In New Mexico, the high-stakes testing and accountability system was the impetus for the formation of PTEC, Parents and Teachers for an Educated Community in Albuquerque.

PTEC formed in 2013 when several teachers and parents from a culturally rich, economically diverse and education focused elementary school began to question how they could consistently earn an “F” grade and be labeled as “failing.” The initial meeting was very well attended, spurred further inquiry into test-based accountability, and garnered more people into the work of unearthing this convoluted and opaque system.

Several teachers and parents met regularly to research topics. They looked into the mandated tests their students and children were required to take in order to determine the cost of the tests, the time spent on testing, and the companies that published the high stakes tests. They created graphs that showed the high correlation between the school’s percentage of families on the free and reduced lunch programs and their school letter grade. In addition, PTEC focused on the importance of a parents right to refuse to have their children take the test. PTEC hosted several community meetings to present their findings and listen to parents and educators experiences around the culture of testing at their schools. The more PTEC learned, the more they realized the false narrative of determining a school’s value and worth through the scores of its students. It became apparent the system of school accountability was not actually improving schools but instead was marginalizing entire communities, negatively affecting enrollment, and demoralizing teachers. PTEC worked hard to keep abreast of and to inform community about the heavy influence of corporate public school reform.

In the Fall of 2014, the inaugural year of the PARCC administration in New Mexico, PTEC organized a *Practice in the PARCC* event for parents and community. The intent was having adults experience online testing that children, as young as 8, would soon experience the following Spring. PTEC

secured a computer lab, invited media, and role-played teachers administering the test in a secure environment. One participant, a practicing attorney, found the fifth-grade writing test deeply disturbing as many questions and their multiple choice answers were written poorly and were misleading. Ultimately, he was unable to locate a correct answer.

The first year of the PARCC adoption, the Albuquerque Public School District (APS) gave 3 full weeks for schools to administer the test to students. Children across the district, starting in 3rd grade, spent hours a day testing in school computer labs. In response, PTEC joined forces with students to protest the PARCC. Students at several high schools made national news when they walked out of school the first day of testing. The High School students were demonized by the local newspaper and our NM Public Education Department (NMPED) as being lazy, willful, and shirking of their responsibilities as well as for being critical of the test that would grade their school and evaluate their teachers. At elementary, middle and high schools across the district, teachers and parents showed up every day of the testing window before school with signs and banners protesting PARCC. Parents and community members often honked or stopped by to ask questions of the picketers. When the bell rang, teachers would go into schools to once again administer the test.

Months after administering the PARCC and well after the following school year, teacher evaluations and school letter grades were revealed. APS, the largest district in the state, had the greatest percentage of “failing” schools and “minimally effective” teachers out of 89 school districts. The NMPED attributed to APS having the most PARCC refusals. In response, the NMPED made a rule that if more than 5% of students refused to take the test, the school grade would go down one letter. After the first round of PARCC based school

grades and evaluations, school communities were disheartened. As a result, protests were minimal in subsequent years.

The following year, Secretary-designee Skandera said that she listened to community voices and reduced PARCC testing time. This concession turned out to be misleading. As test scores became more integral to a school's grade and teacher's evaluation, districts began spending more time on interim assessments preparing students for the annual test. This resulted in an even narrower curriculum, less teaching time, and increased resources spent on practicing for the PARCC.

Many parents began to feel incredible amounts of pressure NOT to opt out of testing. School and district representatives declared refusing to take the PARCC would "hurt" the school and their child's teacher while blaming low school grades on those families who had refused the test. Some teachers feared their students would opt out and affect their evaluation. The momentum of outcry and protests inspired by the first year of PARCC administration was replaced with hopelessness and defeat.

Over the Martinez-Skandera administration, PTEC evolved into a group that continues to work to educate parents, teachers and the community about the true intentions of the accountability system, the impact of charter schools, and importance of community voice in our public schools. This year, the new Democratic Governor ended the reign of PARCC however, we know we must continue to fight for schools that are reflective of the families they serve and against accountability standards created by corporations looking to eliminate and privatize our public neighborhood schools.

## **Where do we go from here?**

The fierce resistance to the “accountability system” detailed in Howard’s book forcefully moved the fight forward but there is much more to do. What is the future of the resistance to corporate takeover of our public schools? Should educators align themselves with other systems in our country that have been privatized such as the health care and prison systems? Since the publication of Howard’s book, teacher strikes around the country have raised awareness to the forces of corporate reform, charter school takeover, and the withering of public school funding. It has also raised awareness on who benefits from the takeover of our public schools and the true intentions of our accountability system. Ryan urges us to continue to, “push back against these forces so that there is a chance for more people to understand the value of schools for the greater good and to hold our society and leaders accountable to that.” This must be the hope for our public schools.

## **Reference**

Layton, L. (2015). Jeb Bush education foundation played leading role in mixing politics, policy. *Washington Post*, January 6.