

Chicago Teachers: Get Corporations Out of Education

Valerie Strauss, *The Washington Post* 17 February 13

A coalition of teachers from public and private schools - including the school that Education Secretary Arne Duncan attended as a child and where President Obama's daughters were enrolled before they moved to Washington - are releasing an open letter to Duncan expressing concerns about department policies that they say promote the overuse of standardized tests. Among the signees are teachers from the Ariel Community Academy, a public school that was founded by a team of people that included Duncan.

The letter is being released the same day that President Obama is speaking in Chicago about his second-term policy initiatives, including a push for gun control. That appeal has special resonance in the city, which had more than 500 homicides last year and is reeling from the shooting of a star teen student just after she had performed with her band on Obama's inaugural ceremonies in Washington D.C. Duncan attended her funeral last week, along with First Lady Michelle Obama.

Here's the letter:

Dear Mr. Duncan,

As primary, secondary, and university educators who are passionate about the importance of a liberal arts education in building and maintaining a democratic society, we are very concerned with the impact of standardized testing on humanities curricula. The widespread trend of teaching to the test is undermining primary and secondary education. Social studies, history, the fine arts, the study of literatures and languages, drama and music; these and other subjects not assessed in the standardized tests of "No Child Left Behind" are subjects that are themselves being left behind as administrators pressure teachers to raise narrowly conceived test scores in a few core areas.

We seek to build respect for the democratic process, critical thinking skills, writing skills, and understanding that is not accurately measured in multiple-choice tests. (see the Fair Test website for a review of the literature: <http://www.fairtest.org/k-12/high%20stakes>). While we see the Common Core Curriculum as a step in the right direction, we steadfastly reject attempts pushed by testing companies to devise standardized assessments to measure progress in reading, writing, and speaking. Nor do we believe that computer programs currently being developed by major assessment corporations, or any form of outsourcing of essay assessments, are viable solutions.

Instead of relying on standardized tests, we believe that the best way to pursue higher standards in reading, writing, and speaking skills is to develop standardized and widely accepted rubrics for assessment and allow teachers to assess their students with these rubrics.

We are very concerned with the extent to which current educational policies have embraced what John Dewey would call "instrumental rationality" in seeking solutions that can be statistically measured. We are currently seeing a national backlash against such measurements from parents, teachers, and administrators. These statistical measures merely confirm the very real social gaps between the haves and the have-nots in American education. (For a review of the literature see <http://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/reardon%20whither%20opportunity%20-%20chapter%205.pdf>).

University administrators have known for some time that high SAT scores correlate closely with socioeconomic class. Students who do well on them may succeed more frequently in college than those who do not, but this correlation may be telling us more about the test than about the students. Secondary teachers often see students who are terrific at taking tests, but who choose to avoid tasks requiring difficult thinking.

University educators want students who can write, research, and think: students who are open minded, passionate, and curious. These qualities are snuffed out under the drive for high scores on standardized multiple-choice tests under "No Child Left Behind."

Secondary educators want to prepare students for the challenges that they will face at colleges and universities. This is difficult to do when an overemphasis on discrete item standardized testing prevents them from engaging their students in the meaningful work that best prepares them for the next level.

We know that your office is bombarded with lobbyists from major testing companies, textbook companies, and big donors with big money who seek to shape education reform. State Boards of Education are faced with similar pressures. We feel strongly that big money is far too invested in the current debate, and we are concerned that their influence is determining much of what passes for "reform." Put your faith in teachers rather than corporate interests to assess reading, writing, and speaking. Do not allow corporations to control American education.

We invite further discussion at your convenience. A delegation from among the signees below will be happy to meet you for hoops and a discussion.

Sincerely yours,

New Trier High School: Lindsey Arado Mike Baeb Kerry Brennan Ian Duell David Hjelmgren Tim Kajfez Tom Kucharski Debbie Johnson Todd Maxman Dean Pinos John O'Connor Alex Zilka

Northern Illinois University: Jerome D. Bowers, History Dept.

University of Illinois-Chicago: Robert Johnston, History Dept.

Concord Review: Will Fitzhugh, Editor and Publisher

The Report Card: William Korach, Editor and Publisher

University of Chicago Laboratory Schools: Luicija Ambrosini Allen Ambrosini Suzanne Baum Charles Branham Wayne Brasler Brad Brickner David Derbes Steve Granzky Lee Gustafson Paul Horton Chris Janus Bob Kass Mark Krewatch Andrea Martonffy Lisa Miller Rachel Nielsen Diane Puklin, Emeritus Susan Shapiro Kelly Storm Brian Wildeman

Ariel Community Academy Allie Griffin Shirley Knox Jake Sklarsky Willis Niederfrank

Chicago Teachers Union