

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## News for Educational Workers

Compiled by Leonard Vogt

### School Closings

An epidemic of school closings in Chicago, New York, Detroit, Washington, Sacramento, Baltimore, Birmingham, and St. Louis reported this spring has been answered with protests throughout the country. Students, teachers, parents and activists are making the point that the savings from closed schools is minimal and the transfer of money to charter schools rarely leads to improved academics. Since most students affected by these closures are students of color, protesters see these closings as a civil rights violation (*The Nation* May 5, 2013).

The Chicago school closings are the largest in U. S. history, eliminating 49 public schools and displacing 40,000 students. Diane Ravitch feels that Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel is punishing the teachers' union for their strike last fall by opening up more charter schools staffed by non-union teachers (<http://portside.org>, May 23, 2013). Although Emanuel's Chicago Public Schools district says these closings must happen to resolve the \$1 billion deficit, Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis says, "Enough with the lies and public deception. School closings will not save money and taxpayers will not see costs benefits in two years. Why? Because vibrant school communities will be quickly transformed into abandoned buildings, neighborhood eyesores and public safety hazards" (<http://portside.org>, March 21, 2013).

The Philadelphia school district, which proposes closing 37 schools, would displace 17,000 students and fire more than 1,100 teachers (*The New York Times*, December 30, 2012).

The Sacramento school district wants to close seven elementary schools, causing twelve students and their parents to file a civil rights lawsuit claiming the closings will result in "a discriminatory effect on the poor, disadvantaged population which is served by these neighborhood schools slated for closure" (<http://portside.org>, June 15, 2013).

Although school closings seem to be an urban problem, outrage and protest has hit rural areas like Sullivan County, Tennessee where a grassroots group called Save the South Zone are collecting signatures and fighting for the consolidation of local middle schools into area high schools ([www.nationofchange.org](http://www.nationofchange.org), June 13, 2013).

### Standardized Testing

"High Stakes Rebellion" (*The Nation*, May 27, 2013) explains that ever since the test-driven mentality of No Child Left Behind took over, protesting parents and educators have not been heard . . . until now, and for a very interesting reason: a cheating scandal in Atlanta, where 35 teachers, administrators, and even a former superintendent changed students' test scores. This act of desperation emboldened anti-testing rebellion across the country. In Texas, the birthplace of the testing movement, legislation reduced the number of tests required for graduation from 15 to 5. In New York, new tests based on new national standards have caused so many complaints that some parents are instructing their children not to take the tests.

An anti-testing op-ed piece in *Time Magazine* (April 2, 2013) reported, "One of the biggest ironies of the Atlanta public schools testing scandal . . . is that the faked scores prevented some schools from accessing three quarters of a million dollars in federal money to support struggling learners because they no longer qualified for help. The impact on individual children was devastating." The piece goes on to say, "Even if we eliminate the cheating, what remains is a broken system built on the dangerous misconception that testing is a proxy for actual teaching and learning."

Cheating on standardized test, however, is nothing new. In the past four academic years, cheating on test score results has been confirmed in 37 states and Washington, D. C. (Answer sheet blog, *The Washington Post*, April 1, 2013).

Cheating on test scores is perhaps one form of rebellion, but the Seattle school teachers took a much more positive step and took the forefront in the movement against testing by boycotting the standardized tests used in the city's schools. The entire teaching faculty of Garfield High School in Seattle voted unanimously to never again administer the Measures of Academic Progress (Common Dreams, January 12, 2013; [www.portside.org](http://www.portside.org), January 28,

2013; *In These Times*, March 2013). For an extended interview with teachers from Garfield High about the testing boycott, see [www.democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org), January 29, 2013.

Anti-testing protest is extending beyond Seattle. Across the country, 61 schools, including 47 in New York City, are refusing to participate in the latest round of tests ([www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com), February 22, 2013). In Chicago, over 300 students from over 25 different public school boycotted the second day of the statewide standardized tests (Common Dreams, April 24, 2013).

In "Why I Won't Let My Son Take the PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment)" ([www.post-gazette.com](http://www.post-gazette.com), April 3, 2013), an associate professor of English explains why she will no longer allow her 9-year old son to take standardized tests in school: high stakes tests are negatively affecting her son, his family, his teachers, his school and, ultimately, the entire education system.

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) has written a position paper called "Debunking the Myths of Standardized Testing" which relates high stakes tests to the education achievement gap, the inability to adequately measure knowledge, the waste of instruction time with negative impacts on student learning, and testing scandals. For a copy, contact CTU.

## Charter Schools

The closing of schools and the use of standardized test results to close them is intimately connected with the push for charter schools. A corporate mentality wants to rule public education in the United States. To that end, corporations are trying to starve public schools in order to justify privatization. In Chicago, for example, the Broad Foundation is venture philanthropy/capitalism "dedicated to redesigning school districts . . . [on] business/finance principals and data-driven accountability . . . focused on the 'return on investment'." Basically, venture philanthropists do not donate unless they can shape policy decisions" (*Chicago Sun Times*, July 30, 2013). In the closing of its 37 schools, Philadelphia outsourced its decision to the business world and, according to a Pew study, came to its final consensus after consulting "a California-based engineering design firm, and . . . an Ohio-based company that specializes in school-closing issues." To give even greater encouragement to corporate investment, the New Markets Tax credit law passed in 2000 allows up to a 39% tax credit to investors in charter schools (AlterNet, February 17, 2013 and May 8, 2013). The Walmart business chain has taken advantage of this tax credit since 2005 by giving more than \$1 billion to organizations and candidates who support privatization ([truthout.org](http://truthout.org), March 5, 2013).

To read more about the origin and growth of charter schools, how they measure up, how they reinforce school segregation, and how parents and teachers are beginning to fight back, see Stan Karp's "Charter Schools and the Future of Public Education" (<http://portside.org/print/node/2003>).

## Divestment

The Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) became the first academic union in Europe to endorse the Palestinian call for an academic boycott of Israel. Referring to Israel as an "apartheid state," the TUI called for "all members to cease all cultural and academic collaboration with Israel, including the [institutional] exchange of scientists, students and academic personalities, as well as all cooperation in research programs" (LaborAgainstWar, April 10, 2013)

Back here at home and several months earlier, lawmakers threatened the funding of Brooklyn College for hosting an event on the divestment (BDS) campaign against Israel, but failed to stop the program ([www.democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org), February 6, 2013). Across the country at University of California Berkeley, the Student Senate passed a resolution in favor of divestment from companies that profit from Israeli occupation (Jewish Voice for Peace, April 24, 2013).

Fossil fuel divestment campaigns are now beginning to sweep the country on over 200 college campuses, with Unity College in Maine, Hampshire College in Massachusetts, and Sterling College in Vermont already committed to divest from 200 fossil fuel companies identified by Bill McKibben's environmental group, 350.org (*In These Times*, March 2013 and [www.nationofchange.org](http://www.nationofchange.org), April 12, 2013). These students organizing for climate justice are making the broader connections between the environment and social issues like debt, racism, and immigration.

## CUNY Pathways

The City University of New York (CUNY) "Pathways" proposal, an administratively driven system wide overhaul of the curriculum that would weaken content and decrease student contact hours, has received a rousing 92% landslide vote of No Confidence in Pathways, which should help put a stop to the implementation of Pathways during the 2013-2014 academic year (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 3, 2013). For reports on the faculty struggle against Pathways, see *Clarion* (February and March, 2013), CUNY's Professional Staff Congress union paper. For those outside the CUNY system, learn more about the history and background that led to the Pathways proposal at <http://pscbc.blogspot.com/2013/sandy-cooper-road-to-pathways.html>.

## Resources

### Books

The goal of Louise Dunlap's *Undoing the Silence: Six Tools for Social Change Writing* (Oakland, CA, New Village Press, 2007, 229 pages) is to reclaim writing as a route to progressive activism. It taps writing tools like free writing, process, feedback, etc. with the specific goal of assisting activists in their work for social change. *Rethinking Schools* adds two more books to its excellent series: *Teaching About the Wars* and an expanded edition of

*Rethinking Mathematics.* For more information, contact [www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org).

## Films

Bullfrog Films has two new movies worthy of classroom use. *Bidder 70* centers on an extraordinary, ingenious and effective act of civil disobedience demanding government and industry accountability. In 2008, University of Utah economics student Tim DeChristopher committed an act that would redefine patriotism in our time, igniting a spirit of civil disobedience in the name of climate justice. Follow Tim, *Bidder 70*, from college student to incarcerated felon. *Shadows of Liberty* reveals the extraordinary truth behind news media censorship, cover-ups and corporate control. The overwhelming influence of corporate conglomerates has distorted news journalism and compromised its values. For preview copies, call toll free 800-543-3764 or go online at [www.bullfrogfilms.com](http://www.bullfrogfilms.com).

*Educaution* is a documentary film by graduate students who are concerned about the future of the American Higher Education System. By focusing on the economic issues surrounding the higher education system, the film examines the increasing concerns of many

Americans regarding the continuing decrease in the quality, value, and financial return of higher education in the market place. For additional information, go to [StudentDebtCrisis.org](http://StudentDebtCrisis.org).

*Youngist* is a web based publishing project for under-26 voices with editors in New York City, Egypt, Greece, and Pakistan. To view a brief video on the project, see <http://www.indiegogo.com/projects/youngist-young-people-powered-media?c=home>.

*Is there a news item, call for papers, upcoming conference, resource, teaching tool, or other information related to progressive education that you would like to share with other Radical Teacher readers? Conference announcements and calls for papers should be at least six months ahead of date. Items, which will be used as found appropriate by Radical Teacher, cannot be returned. Send hard copy to Leonard Vogt, Department of English, LaGuardia Community College (CUNY), 31-10 Thomson Avenue, Long Island City, New York 11101—or email items to [lvogt@nyc.rr.com](mailto:lvogt@nyc.rr.com).*



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