



Making Schools Work Better for all Children

An Inside Look At the Anti-testing Campaign

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While cheating may be occurring in some schools, the real hoodlums in the whole testing arena are the so-called anti-testing folks, who apparently believe their agenda is to conquer capitalism and not simply to stop high stakes tests. Here's just one illuminating exchange from the Assessment Reform Network electronic listserve:

Q: Do we defer on winning on tests until we break the corporate stranglehold, or do you think this is all or nothing, we can't stop the testing and make real progress toward good education for all without stopping capitalism. A: No, of course this isn't an all-or-nothing proposition. It may well be possible to stop high stakes testing and corporate-led reform, though the fact that the same corporate forces are imposing education reforms around the US and around the world suggests that they have a lot at stake. This isn't going to be an easy fight, and we need every resource we can muster to win it. And there are limits on the depth of the transformation of the schools we can achieve while the corporations are the dominant force in society. The elite have a fundamental stake in maintaining social inequality, and the educational policies and practices we would most want to change are designed to justify social inequality by giving it an aura of "meritocracy." Q: Should only anti-capitalists be part of the opposition to testing? A: If people are opposed to testing, they won't stop opposing it just because the anti-testing movement is pointing out the motives behind testing. It will deepen their opposition and their commitment to the battle. But your question seems to imply that most people support capitalism. I think in fact that the great majority of people are opposed to the dog-eat-dog, money-oriented values of capitalism. We are used to being told that there are only two possible systems--capitalism and communism. Given this choice, 99% people choose capitalism. But that doesn't mean that people agree with capitalism or share corporate values. If people actually shared the goals and values of capitalism, the media and politicians wouldn't have to devote full time to deceiving us and controlling us. Someone on ARN the other day posted a speech by William Bennett who registered his shock that parents in state afterstate seem to value "happiness" for their children over high test scores. What is this if not rejection of corporate values? When people see that these tests and education reform itself are designed to train students to fail, designed to sharpen inequality, designed to crush the aspirations and self-esteem of a large portion of our youngsters, they don't applaud and say, "Good, that's just what should happen." They are appalled and disgusted. Also, we are trying to build a very broad-based movement in which people will participate for a variety of motives. Some will participate because they see testing as an attack on kids. Some will because they think testing is simply a poor pedagogical approach. Some will because they see it as an attack on kids which is part of a wider corporate attack on people everywhere. All of them should be part of this movement. Q: ...this is backwards

organizing, moving from general to particular. We should bring in the general (whether that be quality schooling, equity, anti-capitalism) as we see fit along the way. A: Who is the "We" you are referring to? The question is whether there is going to be a democratic movement. I don't agree with movements where "the leaders" keep the overall vision and goals of the movement in their back pocket, to be brought out when they think that people have learned enough about society, politics, etc. to be given a dose of "the general." To have a democratic movement, you have to put your cards on the table. The overall goals and analyses of the movement have to be matters of general discussion in which all can participate. Part of the question here depends on our view of people generally. If one believes that people already have a great deal of understanding of class society, based on their values and their lifetime of experience, then there is no need to lead them by the hand through particular experiences until they're ready for the general. People are not blank slates and they're not stupid. Q: "2) Expose the corporate agenda behind the tests." Why is this number two? Exposing harmful agendas is indeed part of organizing, but your numbers 3 and 4 are more useful -- and by doing those, then the corporate agenda, if it is what you think it is, becomes exposed by being in opposition to real reform. A: Eric Crump already answered this--these are simultaneous activities and should be bulleted rather than numbered. But there is another point to be made here as well. In education as elsewhere the corporations represent themselves as the salvation of society. The Business Roundtable and corporate America don't deny that they are behind the tests; they simply lie about their motives. Exposing their real motives is a way of taking the offensive against the corporations and changing the nature of the battle. No longer are we simply trying to stop one more bad thing from happening to our children or our society. By exposing the motives of the corporate reformers, we're confirming and helping people understand more clearly the destructive role that Big Business plays throughout society. We'll be confirming rejection of the idea that "What's good for GM is good for the country--and for your children" and confirming a more human-centered value system. People are being told that the schools have failed and that the corporations and tests and standards are here to help. A parade of media misinformation and "educational experts" all support the corporate prescription. Jerry Bracey and others can and have provided endless evidence (if anyone will publish it) explaining that they are lying, but until people understand WHY they are lying, it's still just a battle of experts. People can only fight these tests and corporate reform effectively if they know why they are happening. People have plenty of experience dealing with corporate values at work, dealing with corporate polluters, dealing with insurance companies, dealing with corporations in the many other ways that they affect our lives. Explaining that the corporations and the Business Roundtable are lying about education too is not going to be terribly shocking to most people, and it will be consistent with what they already know. It will help people understand the whole picture, and help make more clear what is at stake in this battle. Q: "1) Expose the fraudulent nature of the tests." That is only part of number 1... A: Yes, of course, this is shorthand. I mean that we should expose everything that is fraudulent and educationally destructive and intended to create fear and insecurity and sharpen inequality and competition and everything else negative about the tests. Many people on this list have already done a great job supplying evidence under this general heading. Q: Going your route will I think mean we don't win on the specifics. A: On the contrary--there is nothing the corporate and governing class fear more than a broad-based, popular movement which begins to raise fundamental questions about the goals and direction of American society. If the corporate leaders feel that they can safely contain opposition to high stakes testing and corporate reform to a debate over pedagogical methods, with no questioning of corporate goals in the matter, they will feel quite comfortable in pressing ahead, no matter how many students may boycott or how distraught parents or teachers may be. If, however, they feel

that the movement against testing is turning into a movement "to break the corporate stranglehold on human society," they will begin to think things over a bit. Nothing will more quickly lead them to retreat from their plans than a calculation that education reforms designed to tighten their control of society are in fact leading to the growth of a movement which is undermining their control and throwing into question its very legitimacy.

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The Center for Education Reform
910 Seventeenth Street, NW, Suite 1120 • Washington, DC 20006
800-521-2118 • 301-986-8088 • Fax: 301-986-1826
www.edreform.com • cer@edreform.com
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