

# Critical Education

Volume 3 Number 9

October 15, 2012

ISSN 1920-4125

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## *Against Obedience*

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*Substance & New England Society for the Study of Education*

Citation: Ohanian, S (2012). Against obedience *Critical Education*, 3(9). Retrieved from <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticaled/article/view/183270>

### **Abstract**

*This article was originally delivered as the Second Annual Adam Renner Education for Social Justice Lecture at the Rouge Forum's Occupy Education! Class Conscious Pedagogies and Social Change Conference held at Miami University in Oxford, OH, June 22-24, 2012. Starting with a personal journey in learning that political activism isn't as scary as many teachers believe, the article highlights the highly political nature of press coverage of Race to the Top and the Common Core State Standards initiative, zeroing in on the quisling nature of teacher union and professional organization antics to keep a seat at the political table. Questioning the silence on critical issues of higher education providers of educational products to consumers—aka professors—the author insists that whining isn't the same as doing. The article concludes with several points on how educators can take action.*



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It's rather mind-boggling to find myself in McGuffey Hall—to find myself, the only teacher in my school who refused to use a basal reader, in such close proximity to William Holmes McGuffey. With the publication in 1836 of the most famous school textbook of all time, *The McGuffey Reader*, McGuffey, a professor at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, planted a strong seed for a national curriculum. Estimates posit the sales of McGuffey Readers sold between 1836 and 1960 at 122 million copies, putting it in a category with the *Bible* and *Webster's Dictionary*.

The McGuffey Reader was used in 37 states. Forty-Six states have accepted the Common Core bribe, that is, 46 states plus Mariana Islands. I'd like to see Common Core consigned to the Mariana Trench. I admit I didn't know what that was until, when writing a review of E. D. Hirsh's *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know*, I carried the book on my travels and amazed and alarmed strangers on airplanes, in hospital waiting rooms, and in hotel lobbies about items on the list: What do you know about Leyden jars and when did you know it? How are your Mach numbers? Is your *amicus curiae* in working order? My husband was the only person who could identify Marianas Trench, and he was quick to admit he acquired this arcane bit of information from *The Guinness Book of World Records*, and not from his university education, which includes a Ph.D. in physics. When I asked him—in a long distance phone call—about “throw weight,” he laughed for ten minutes before starting a lecture on naval engineering. I wonder if my complaint in the pages of *Education Week* about the presence of Onan and the absence of Ruth, Naomi, Esther, and Anne Frank might have inspired the changes in the second edition.

Being here in Oxford, Ohio also puts me uncomfortably close to the site of that blood-sucking education law No Child Left Behind, which was signed in Hamilton, Ohio in 2002. Soon after that event, I started a website in opposition to NCLB. It has since morphed into opposing just about everything the State does in education. I started the site because I thought it was important to document what was happening to public education. I saw myself as a sort of Madame Defarge, chronicling the day's bloody events. In the ensuing ten years the site has gradually moved from *what's* happening into *why* it's happening. Until teachers understand the reasons they're being beaten up, they'll never revolt, and the thing I can't forgive the unions for is that besides avoiding any explanations, they perpetuate the reform myths.

Very early in my teaching career I was involved in a federal effort to contribute to teachers' professional knowledge. After teaching for a year in New York City, I received a National Defense Education Act grant for a six-week summer program at Princeton University. Topic: Educating urban youth. Although there is some irony in holding a course on the problems of urban youth in bucolic Princeton (They bused in kids from Trenton every day.), I'll be forever grateful to the federal government for introducing me to Daniel Fader and his *Hooked on Books*. These days, Federal reformers would denounce the Princeton course as anarchistic. Today the Feds offer a carefully controlled, scripted message—with templates paid for by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and distributed by the James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy.

### **Becoming Political**

Through my website, for the past ten years I've worked at getting teachers to become more political. I've abetted a number of grassroots efforts—from the easy stuff such as buttons and T-shirts and petitions to the more difficult test refusal. I'm talking teacher refusal. If we could ever

get a school to refuse to give the test, the refusal would spread like wildfire. But I know first-hand that most teachers feel that their work is with kids and most decidedly *not* with political action. Years ago, Patrick Shannon asked me if I'd participate in the political caucus he was organizing for an upcoming NCTE convention. A great admirer of Pat's work, I wanted to say yes, but, as I confessed to him, "I'm not political."

Pat reassured me. "All you have to do it tell your toilet paper story." Ohmygoodness. I can't tell you how shocked I was to hear this. First shocked and then relieved. If my four-year-chase after toilet paper to fit the dispensers in the women's lavatory is all it takes to be political, I could do it. I had, in fact, already done it. I'd actually been political without knowing it.

In 1987, I published an article in *Phi Delta Kappan* called "The Paper Chase." "It was named the best education article of the year, beating out mass media finalists such as *Newsweek*. The whole thing started out by my trying to persuade the principal in my middle school to order toilet paper for the ladies room that fit the dispensers. By the time I'd talked to the janitor, the principal, the union rep, the Teachers and Administrators Liaison Committee, I'd learned a lot about how bureaucracies function and about where teachers fit into the scheme of things. And that was just the beginning.

When I organized The Women's March—we walked in a line carrying toilet paper rolls on broomsticks--the principal confiscated my roll of toilet paper, saying that the sight of "you women carrying rolls of toilet paper in the hallway--in full view of the students--is one of the most disgusting sights imaginable." I could easily have pointed out two dozen more disgusting sights in our school. He said that if I didn't like the toilet paper supplied by the district I certainly could bring my own, but he insisted that I keep it out of the sight of innocent children. After this Women's March, some colleagues announced loudly that there was no problem with the tissue.

People familiar with my writing find this hard to believe, but I am a shy person. Writing allows my other self to surface. But even this other self avoids making phone calls. For two years working in Manhattan and another two in Princeton, I didn't even own a phone. I mention this to illustrate how difficult I found it to make that first phone call about toilet paper. First I called four different offices at the County Health Department--in search of someone willing to discuss public school lavatory requirements. Each time my call was transferred, I heard the incredulous question, "You say your tissue is in a shoe box? On the floor?"

Finally, I was transferred to someone in the Environmental Protection Unit. He told me that there is no question that "rolls are more sanitary than single sheets and are recommended for toilets in public buildings."

"Would you write a letter to that effect to my principal?" I asked.

Long silence.

"Actually," I offered, "it would be fine if you wrote the letter to me. I could pass it on."

Suddenly, the fellow who had been so forthright about the preferred installation of tissue in public buildings became cautious in the extreme. It is one thing to make statements over the phone; recommendations in writing are apparently an entirely different kettle of fish. He told me that he did not have the authority to write letters. I asked to be transferred to someone who *did* have letter-writing authority, and then the bureaucratic waffling began in earnest. I talked to three

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more people. But, after agreeing that roll dispensers are preferable to single-tissue dispensers, each one clammed up when I asked for a letter to that effect.

A public-health nurse was sympathetic. Drawing on her experience in fieldwork in Appalachia, she gave me directions for making a toilet paper roll out of a coat hanger. But she wouldn't write a letter either, pointing out that that was not her area of responsibility. The Senior Public Health Sanitation Officer informed me that "all standards for the maintenance of health in public schools are the responsibility of the New York State Education Department." He further informed me that the County Department of Health cannot enter a school unless invited by school officials. He agreed that, if we had an outbreak of bubonic plague, the health department would not wait for an official invitation to investigate. But he suggested that the dispensing of toilet paper fell short of such an emergency. He would not write a letter either, because he did not want to infringe on someone else's responsibilities. Everybody at the Department of Health asserted that someone there *did* have the authority to write letters, but I finally gave up trying to find that someone.

There were more phone calls: Three transfers at the New York State Education Department, more at the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the agency of the U. S. Department of Labor that is ostensibly the guardian of the health and safety of workers--mine workers, steelworkers, and cotton pickers, maybe. Not teachers, who are referred back to the local parent-teacher association.

I spoke to administrators at New York State Department of Labor, Division of Safety and Health. In both New York City and in Albany. Their line was pretty much the same: "There are no restroom standards for schools." One told me that if I had complaints about toilet paper dispensers I could write my congressional representative about getting provisions added to the Public Employee Health and Safety codes.

You can see that by now I was far beyond the tissue issue. I was a resident of Kafka's *Castle*. I had discovered that, despite a myriad government agencies, teachers live on a plantation ruled by the whim of a few people whose best talent seems to be passing the buck. Teachers have no inherent right to decent working conditions.

I gave up. I conceded that there was no way that I was going to get working toilet paper dispensers in the lavatories.

Then a new school year brought a contract dispute with the board of education, and I was officially reprimanded by the principal for wearing a T-shirt (on which I'd sewed lace trim to make it look snazzy) that said "Support Troy Teachers." He ordered me to take off the T-shirt. I pointed out that P. E. teachers in the school wore T-shirts with letters, and asked which specific letters in my shirt were offensive. Unable to deal with complexity, the principal issued a fiat that the wearing of any T-shirt with letters was forbidden. The union then asked me to take off the T-shirt as my wearing it might interfere with "sensitive negotiations." The principal and I were standing in the hallway outside the lavatories when he informed me that my "dress attire" was not up to professional standards and that an official document from the superintendent would follow.

I asked, "Is the toilet paper in there of professional standards?" He smirked and said, "I don't know. I don't use the ladies' room." Whereupon I went a bit berserk. For *four years* I'd been trying to effect a reasonable change through regular channels: the custodian, the principal, the union, the county health department, the state department of education, OSHA, and so on. And this guy could win every battle; he could smile and tell me that the ladies didn't know how to pull

the paper, that storing tissue in a shoebox was reasonable ... I threw a minor fit and told him I was going to phone the local media and tell them that he said he didn't know whether we had suitable toilet paper in the ladies' room because he didn't use the ladies room.

Toilet paper rolls were installed in all faculty lavatories the following day.

Now I know what Edmund Burke meant when he said, "There is, however, a limit at which forbearance ceases to be a virtue." Simply put this means that teachers should not wait for years to throw a fit. It took more years for me to learn that all this was political. In this, I'm typical of most teachers—so immersed in the daily intricacies of teaching—or securing toilet paper—that we don't see the political forest for the trees. This is why I push so hard at my website. As Robert Frost once asked, "How many things have to happen to you before something occurs to you? It takes some of us longer than others.

### **Great Moments at *The New York Times***

It was only because my principal never read anything but the sport section that he didn't realize my threat to "inform the media" wasn't worth a hill of beans. If I hear one more person talk about the 'liberal media' in America, I will probably vomit on them. Truth is, 97.63% percent of the media are stenographers for power. My recent encounter with *The New York Times* illustrates this. Picking up my account from my website, Sam Smith at *Progressive Review* called it "Great moments at *The New York Times*." I admit to being excited when I received an e-mail a *New York Times* editor addressing me as an education expert and inviting me to submit a short opinion piece, using the film "Race to Nowhere" as a departure point for writing about student stress. When I wouldn't delete criticism of Thomas Friedman, they wouldn't publish it. I say "they" because the editor with whom I corresponded referred to her edits in the plural: "Our feeling..."

Here's what I wrote, carefully expurgating the original student text:

"Race to Nowhere" accurately portrays the heartbreaking stress schools place on children. The fear of "not being good enough" now begins with standardized requirements for Pre-K. Although the *Times* review emphasized the pressure felt by suburban students preparing their resumes for the Ivy League, a Vermont high schooler with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) wrote six pages of expletives on his federally-required test.

"You f\_\_\_ing a\_\_holes. I have been taking these f\_\_\_ing tests since first grade and I am f\_\_\_ing sick of it. I know I can't spell. You know I can't spell. I have more important things to do than this bulls\_\_ test. ... This is a f\_\_\_ing waste of time. You could spend this time teaching me something."

Suspended for inappropriate behavior, this youth missed out on the lumberjack test he'd planned to take the next day. The state of Vermont owes him an apology for going along with federal mandates insisting that one size fits all.

The pressure will get worse. The US Department of Education bribed states to accept Common Core Standards and has dished out over \$300 million for tests to accompany these standards. Wordsworth and Jane Austen for all.

Parents and teachers must fight for childhood. Say "No!" to Barack Obama, to Thomas Friedman, to Ben Bernanke, to Oprah, and to everybody else who mouths

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nonsense about educating workers for the global economy, trying to put the blame for our economic woes on the backs of schoolchildren.

We need artists, bakers, lumberjacks, manicurists, welders, and yurt builders, as well as people who study math and science in college. Let's respect the variety of skills needed in our communities—and make sure everyone receives a decent wage. Talking about “Race to Nowhere” is a good place to start.

***The New York Times to Susan:*** Unfortunately, I can't use your anecdote about the Vermont kid, so I've tried to rework the piece to make your point.

***Susan to The New York Times:*** I “fixed” the expletive problem. I guess I can understand that a family newspaper has certain issues, though I know that the student's words pull at heartstrings. I read them at my Bank Street College Biber Lecture this fall (They bill this talk as the annual lecture *that sets the tone for the year*).

There was more back and forth, and then we got to “The Thomas Friedman Problem.”

***Original Text:*** Parents and teachers must fight for childhood. Say “No!” to Barack Obama, to Thomas Friedman, to Ben Bernanke, to Oprah, and to everybody else who mouths nonsense about educating workers for the global economy, trying to put the blame for our economic woes on the backs of schoolchildren.

***The New York Times Edit:*** Parents and teachers must fight for childhood. Say “No!” to everybody who mouths this nonsense about educating workers for the global economy, trying to put the blame for our economic woes on the backs of schoolchildren.

***Susan to The New York Times:*** Why has this paragraph been stripped of content? Saying “everybody” doesn't hold *anyone* responsible. Is one not allowed to criticize the influential people who mouth the global economy nonsense? I want the original paragraph back.

***The New York Times to Susan:*** Regarding your penultimate paragraph, our feeling is that it seems odd to blame such a large audience—celebrities, etc.—when the fault lies with the policymakers and education experts, so hopefully you're okay with that tweak, which goes back to most of your original wording.

***The New York Times Edit:*** Parents and teachers must fight for childhood. Say “No!” to political leaders and education policy experts who mouth this nonsense about educating workers for the global economy, trying to put the blame for our economic woes on the backs of schoolchildren.

***Susan to The New York Times:*** I co-wrote a book called *Why Is Corporate America Bashing Our Public Schools*, detailing why the fault most definitely does NOT lie with education experts. The current education policy was planned by the Business Roundtable with help from politicians like Gov. Bill Clinton and IBM chief Lou Gerstner. Obama has come late to the party, but he's there. Thomas Friedman, for one, frequently orates about our economy depending on schoolchildren taking college prep curriculum. And his words are quoted by CEOs and politicians. I'm willing to take out Oprah, though every teacher would know why her name is there.

That was the end of our exchange. I did not hear from anyone at *The New York Times* again. If you want to read about poverty's effect on public school attendees, then you'll have to read Professor P. L. Thomas, not Thomas Friedman (Matt Taibbi asked the right question: "What the fuck is he talking about? ... makes me wonder if the editors over at *The New York Times* editorial page spend their afternoons dropping acid or drinking rubbing alcohol."). People who say that Twitter is a waste of time aren't following the right people. I pass on more of P. L. Thomas's Tweets than those of anybody else.

The course of the edits is interesting and even significant. *The New York Times* removed the suggestion that the State of Vermont should apologize to the high school student and I Okayed it. When they substituted "truck drivers" for "yurt builders," I pointed out that in that sentence yurt builders represent a whole group of people who don't want to be standardized, but I agreed to the change. When I stood firm on laying blame for student anxiety at the feet of Obama, Friedman, and Bernanke (offering, as a gesture of compromise, to remove Oprah), suddenly the *New York Times* reinstated the State of Vermont apology and the yurt builders. I interpreted this as an attempt to get me to yield on Obama, Friedman, and Bernanke "Give her back the yurt builders, so she'll shut up about Friedman!" Although *The New York Times* initially addressed me as an expert, in the end my experience, my research, and my opinion added up to a goose egg. Five people contributed to "Room for Debate" on Dec. 13, 2010, blaming student stress on a variety of things including AP classes, homework, too many after-school activities. Of course, nobody blamed Thomas Friedman. Most will think *The New York Times* won. Maybe so. But I think their victory would have been bigger had I gone along with the demand to remove that one sentence. It would have been worse than taking off the T-shirt, which I've regretted for decades.

I don't think I'm over reading things to note Noam Chomsky's observation:

The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum—even encourage the more critical and dissident views. That gives people the sense that there's freethinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate.

As we will see, this is a strategy used by the press, by the unions, by the professional organizations.

### **Experts Quoted in the Media**

When *Extra*, the publication of FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), invited me to contribute to the September 2010 education issue, I decided to read all the articles on Race to the Top and Common Core appearing in the print media between mid-May 2009 and mid-July 2010 --to see who gets quoted—and who doesn't. Interested in which "independent experts" reporters called upon to offer wisdom about these programs, I eliminated cites from state education officials, union officials, and elected politicians. This left me with 152 outside experts quoted in 414 articles—pared down from over 700 articles.

Early on it became clear that the problem lies not just in who gets quoted but also in how they are identified. For example, Chester Finn, Mike Petrilli and Andy Smarick at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute were cited 49 times. *Education Week* wants you to know that Smarick is a "prolific writer on Race to the Top." Might there be more telling information here? When citing Finn, Sam Dillon and Tamar Lewin at *The New York Times* identify him simply as "president of

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an education research group in Washington.” Sometimes, *Education Week* quoted Fordham Institute people in three articles in the same issue. Never giving a hint about their bias, where they get their money, and so on.

Of the 152 experts cited in the 414 articles under review, 24 were associated with universities, but you won’t find academics elucidating pedagogy. Instead, we get mostly economists and statisticians supporting market-based education policies. Take your pick whether it’s deviousness or just sloppiness when the *Washington Post* (January 2, 2010) and *The New York Times Magazine* (March 7, 2010) refer to Eric Hanushek as a “Stanford economist.” Hanushek is a fellow at the Hoover Institution, a conservative think tank on the Stanford campus. Carlo Rotella at least gets the descriptor right in the *New Yorker* (February 1, 2010) when he pegs Hanushek as “one of the most outspoken senior academics in the market-forces camp.”

Certainly, “market forces” are the unacknowledged elephant in the room of the Obama/Duncan/Gates school reform policy. But it’s up to the reader to figure this out when the press quotes experts associated with groups like New America Foundation, NewSchools Venture Fund, New Leaders for New Schools, Mass Insight and on and on—without a hint about their pro-market agenda. Reporters often don’t even identify the Cato Institute as libertarian, never mind reveal the ties of the charter-advocate NewSchools Venture Fund to the Broad and Gates Foundations and to the Administration. How many education reporters, citing Fred M. Hess (14 times in this time period), director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, could even name a scholar who represents a view from the left, never mind phone one and ask for a sound bite? Maybe more shameful than who’s quoted over and over is who’s missing. Reports can’t find anybody to comment on the relationship of capital, democracy and schooling. Or call Richard Rothstein, research associate and respected author of numerous books, briefs, studies and reports, including the Economic Policy Institute Briefing Paper he wrote with William Peterson, “Let’s Do the Numbers: Department of Education’s ‘Race to the Top’ Program Offers Only a Muddled Path to the Finish Line” (April 20, 2010). Wouldn’t you think a single reporter churning out the 600+ articles on Race to the Top might ask him about *that*? Maybe the problem is that, for years, Rothstein has been reminding people that no matter how many fourth graders pass the test, it won’t raise the minimum wage. The education press seem incapable of hearing this message--or sharing it with the public.

I keep thinking about who else is missing. Although I put blogs beyond the purview of my study, this bit from David Berliner’s commentary on Valerie Straus’s *Washington Post Answer Sheet* blog nicely shows the kind of analysis that seems to scare reporters off:

We create through our housing, school attendance and school districting policies a system designed to encourage castes--a system promoting a greater likelihood of a privileged class and an underclass. These are, of course, harbingers of demise for our fragile democracy.

Berliner was not cited once in the print media during the time period studied. Why would the press shut out an expert, the co-author of the acclaimed *Manufactured Crisis and Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America’s Schools*—while calling up Joe Williams and his cohort Charles Barone of the Democrats for Education Reform, a political action committee (PAC) tied to hedge fund interests, for 40 citations? Forty. Williams and Barone, of course, can be depended on to trumpet market-based policies and smear public schools.

The *New York Times* has a “Wealth Matters” column but no “Poverty Matters” column, a Business Section but no Labor Section. And their education coverage reflects this.



## Unions and Professional Organizations

If our unions and professional unions worked for the interests of their dues-paying members they would explain what former Research Analyst Arizona School Boards Association Michael Martin, put so succinctly: "Public schools *have* to fail in order to crack open this egg and give these financiers access to the \$360 billion they are after (estimates are that it is around \$700 billion today). No matter what logic you use to explain the problems or successes of public education, it will be of no avail: public schools *have* to fail. Whatever it takes."

Not only do unions ignore this hard fact about market-driven education policy, they attack those who resisting federal reform. I worked hard for the Educator Roundtable petition launched by Professor Philip Kovacs calling for the abolition of NCLB. NEA headquarters sent out urgent messages to their locals, denouncing my website and telling members *not* to sign because any anti-NCLB activity jeopardized their "seat at the table." The reality is that the only way teachers appear at education reform tables is when they're served up as the main course—to be eaten alive. I suggested to *Phi Delta Kappan* editors that it would be interesting to see publish point/counterpoint articles. In the December 2007 issue then-NEA director of education policy and practice Joel Packer wrote a defense of their position. Kovacs and I wrote why NCLB needs to be repealed.

My association with the AFT is more direct, and it did not get off to an auspicious start. My first teaching day in New York City was on a Wednesday in October. Hired to replace a teacher who went to work for the UFT, I learned that he'd left the day before parent conferences. So my first day on the job I met the parents, never having laid eyes on the kids. Decades later, I'm still shocked that a teacher would pull such a stunt. And that the UFT would abet him. Decades later, I was sitting in the second row, an on-the-spot witness to the standing ovation given to presidential candidate Barack Obama at the 2008 AFT convention in Chicago—right after he delivered, by video (even though George Schmidt proved he was in Chicago at the time), his education platform that included more testing, merit pay, and so forth. As Joanne Barkin has observed, "[T]he federal drive to use student test scores to grade teachers--came exclusively from the Obama administration." And now Obama has hyped up his agenda, and both the AFT and the NEA continue to applaud, endorse, and contribute to his campaign. The NEA gave its automatic endorsement many months before the 2012 Democratic convention, and their 2012 Representative Assembly refused to consider a dump Duncan resolution.

AFT president Randi Weingarten's gushing praise of the Common Core in an AFT press release--"I am a zealot about the Common Core" — has its roots in Al Shanker's 1987 dust jacket exaltation over E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know*. On Twitter, Weingarten pronounced, "AFT supported common core well before it was in vogue--there is a knowledge base kids need to know." When I posted this on my website, I added this note:

### Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Grants

2011 American Federation of Teachers Educational Foundation \$1,000,000  
 2011 American Federation of Teachers Educational Foundation \$230,000  
 2010 American Federation of Teachers Educational Foundation \$3,421,725  
 2010 American Federation of Teachers Educational Foundation \$217,200  
 2009 American Federation of Teachers Educational Foundation \$250,000  
 2009 American Federation of Teachers Educational Foundation \$1,000,000

In 2011, the AFT sent money to their Chicago affiliate to design instructional units that include curriculum, instruction, and performance assessments aligned to the Common Core State [sic] Standards. Other monies for embedding the Common Core went to Albuquerque. There, the union is working with the local PBS station. Subsequent AFT press releases claim these materials are well received. Albuquerque and Chicago teachers tell me a different story. At a critical moment when teachers need a union to explain why they are under assault, their union offers Common Core piffle, what longtime educator Marion Brady calls “a pig in a poke.” Brady points out that this pig is “a freak, shaped by naiveté, political ideology, unexamined assumptions, ignorance of history, and myths.” Of course the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association received a ton of Gates money to promote the Common Core. Gates shipped off \$100 million to Hillsborough and \$90 million and then, acting in concert, the U. S. Department of Education sent them Race to the Top lucre. Arne Duncan’s spokesman Peter Cunningham told Daniel Goldman, one of the very few reporters to write about Bill Gates’ moneyed influence on national education policy, that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation agenda “is very much aligned with the Obama Administration agenda. We partner with them on a whole host of things.”

Writing in *The Nation*, Jane McAlevey warns, “As long as the labor movement (what is left of a labor movement) continues to support 'Democrats' who stab them in the back, the future for the labor movement is nonexistent. And since the Democratic Party cannot exist without union financial support, the Party itself, under Obama and the phonies, is committing suicide.” Rich Gibson helps us to get to the root of the problem:

It is Not Just Bankers. It is Capitalism. The core issue of our time is the potential of a mass, activist, class conscious movement to transcend capitalism met by the reality of a corporate state, fascism, conducting perpetual war on workers worldwide. “We Say Fight Back!”

### **Save Our Schools: SOS**

I went to the SOS rally in Washington D. C. in July 2011—just to be a body there—to help the count. On the way to the airport, my husband asked me how many people would be there and I replied, “100,000.” That just shows what a cockeyed optimist I am. Among the 5,000 or so people there, I met wonderful, earnest teachers who had journeyed from Oregon, from Oklahoma, and so on. I marched with New York’s Grassroots Education Movement (GEM), the people who made “The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman.” When you talk to young activist teachers like this, you begin to think there might be hope.

For over a year, I asked SOS leaders why SOS doesn’t oppose Common Core. Finally, the answer came: *because it would upset the unions*, the same unions that wouldn’t denounce NCLB. This was no surprise. After all, Lily Eskelsen, NEA base salary of \$248,349 and allowances of \$54,285 for a total of \$302,634, was a featured speaker at the SOS rally podium. But off the podium, union presence at the rally was only token. I was startled to see that the DC union, which provided water for the event, couldn’t even get out local teachers who were only a subway ride away. The Chicago union was well represented, as was Wisconsin, but otherwise? No. So with so little presence at the event, one has to ask why the unions have so much influence on the agenda. The solution seems to be to act on the original good impulses and return to the grassroots impulses for change.

## National Council of Teachers of English

I was a member of National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) for decades, finding great guidance and community there. So you will know how thrilled I was by this announcement:

“Susan Ohanian, creator of [www.susanoohanian.org](http://www.susanoohanian.org), has won the 2003 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Orwell Award. The award recognizes writers who have made outstanding contributions to the critical analysis of public discourse and is given by the NCTE Committee on Public Doublespeak.” The announcement said the Web site was selected “for its clarity, honesty, and eloquence ... dedicated to social and educational justice ... with little sympathy for those who view children as things, as commodities.” (NCTE press release, Dec. 4, 2003)

Fame is fleeting. These days I’m censored from posting on the NCTE online Connected Community. I received this message:

NCTE has received your post. We will not be publishing the post because it violates the Code of Conduct for the community, specifically the sections noted below: All defamatory, abusive, profane, threatening, offensive, or illegal materials are strictly prohibited.

I wrote the Executive Director, asking what on earth I had written that was “defamatory, abusive, profane, threatening, offensive, or illegal.” I am still waiting for a reply—and won’t be sending any more membership dues until I get one.

Here is the message I attempted to post—in response to the NCTE decision to split their online Connected Community into two groups—“The NCTE Members Open Forum is now the Teaching and Learning Forum; it will focus predominantly on the daily challenges of classroom teaching and planning. We’ve also created a discussion area just for those important education policy conversations: the Education Policy Forum.”

I’d say that the teacher who expresses concern about having to enter 27,000+ assessment marks for her kindergartners IS talking about daily challenges of classroom teaching and planning *as well as* about important education policy.

A professional organization claiming that daily challenges of classroom teaching and planning can be separated from important education policy conversations:

- a) is ignorant.
- b) is hiding something.
- c) doesn’t want to be forced into taking a stand on the Common Core Curriculum Standards.
- d) just got big money from a foundation with a history of strong support of charter schools.
- e) all of the above.

My website was awarded the 2003 NCTE George Orwell Award for Distinguished Contribution for Honesty and Clarity in Public Language. The award hangs on my wall.

I nominate NCTE for the 2011 Doublespeak Award.

This is my personal story. The bigger story is that the NCTE continues to ignore a Sense of the House Motion condemning the Common Core State (*sic*) Standards. Instead, they publish books, advertise consultants, and set up (for-pay) Internet professional development courses—to reap profits from teachers' worry about the Common Core. The role of courtiers is to parrot the official propaganda. When the September 2011 NCTE *Council Chronicle* ran an interview with Arne Duncan and he claimed, "My wife and I just did Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer with our two children [first grader and third grader]," it did not seem to occur to the interviewer to express astonishment or to ask, "What's next? *War and Peace*?" The for-members-only publication no longer accepts letters—or articles. Everything is scripted by Central Office.

### **The Professor Problem**

I can't resist pointing out that according to the story I heard, before he became a professor, John Dewey was a failed teacher. He taught elementary school for one year in the village where I live, Charlotte, Vermont. His ashes are buried 13 miles from there at the University of Vermont, where he earned his undergraduate degree. The story goes that this Charlotte elementary school experience convinced John Dewey that he was unsuited to the task of teaching young children, and so he lit out for Johns Hopkins to get his doctorate. After writing a dissertation on the psychology of Kant, he moved on to the newly-founded University of Chicago. In our current climate of so many people in power insisting that anybody can teach elementary school, I like to tell this story. I use it to assert my authority as a longtime elementary teacher.

Open Letter on my Website by Omaha lawyer, Rob Bligh

I think that I understand the political malice that guides the Republicans.

I think that I understand the political correctness that guides the Democrats.

I think that I understand the arrogant ignorance that guides the Gates crowd.

What I do not understand is the deafening silence of nearly all of the teacher-training faculty employed by America's colleges and universities. They are allowing their graduates to be roasted slowly over a flame of lies and they are doing nothing about it. Perhaps the professors think that they will escape to early retirement before Gates and the politicians come for them. Some profession!

After I posted this on my website, I received a long letter of complaint from a professor who took offense. He explained his dilemma, ending with, "I don't think many of us believe in the Common Core, but at the same time we feel a responsibility to ensure that our students are prepared for this new environment." This reflects what I read on listservs populated by professors and by the professional organizations they lead. Gotta prepare those teachers to prepare students to be commodities in the Global Economy.

I replied, "I know a lot of good people will be upset by Rob Bligh's letter but I think maybe it's past time for a "J'accuse" statement. I admit to despair at the National Writing Project accepting \$2,645,593 from the Gates Foundation to promote Common Core (ASCD got

\$3,024,695, AFT \$1,000,000).” Since my site doesn't have the facility for discussion, I offered to post Rob Bligh's accusation and the professor's response over at Jim Horn's *Schools Matter* ([www.schoolsmatter.info](http://www.schoolsmatter.info)), noting that people can discuss the issue there. The professor declined, citing “political tetchiness” and not wanting to be seen as critical of his education department or the National Writing Project.

In a *Texas Observer* op-ed, Robert Jensen introduces himself thusly, “Hi, I'm Robert Jensen, a provider of educational products to consumers at the University of Texas at Austin. I used to introduce myself as a UT professor ...” Jensen reveals how distant he is from the current marketplace view of education as an economic exchange and students as consumers of the education product when he says his teaching “focuses on how citizens should understand concentrations of power in government and corporations and how journalists should respond.” For years, Glen Ford at *The Black Agenda Report* has been warning that the goal of corporate education reform is to turn teaching into a service industry.

“Teachers are the biggest obstacle in the way of the corporate educational coup, which is why the billionaires, eagerly assisted by their servants in the Obama administration, have made demonization and eventual destruction of teacher unions their top priority.”

So the National Writing Project has joined the professorial parade in becoming a participant in the economic exchange. If they want to promote writing, they could take a page from Professor Stephen Krashen, author of hundreds of letters to the editor. Krashen doesn't let a bogus education claim in the media go unanswered.

Of course some professors are leading the resistance. Rich Gibson and E. Wayne Ross have shown me that “The Education Agenda Is a War Agenda.” I have their book and stacks of others sitting at my elbow and piled at my ankles—books I referred to when writing this piece, books with titles like *Neoliberalism and Education Reform* (Ross & Gibson, 2007); *Hopeless: Barack Obama and the Politics of Illusion* (St Clair & Frank, 2012); *The Phenomenon of Obama and the Agenda for Education* (Carr & Porfilio, 2011); *Reading Wide Awake: Politics, Pedagogies, & Possibilities* (Shannon, 2011); *Power, Resistance, and Literacy: Writing for Social Justice* (Gorlewski, 2011); *Ignoring Poverty in the U. S.: the Corporate Takeover of Public Education* (Thomas, 2012), *Free Voluntary Reading* (Krashen, 2011); *Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education* (Noble, 2003); *Terminator Planet: The First History of Drone Warfare* (Turse, 2012); *The Operators: The Wild and Terrifying Inside Story of America's War in Afghanistan* (Hastings, 2012); *The Imperial Messenger: Thomas Friedman at Work* (Fernández, 2011). And I know I'll buy more—probably tomorrow. But if my own royalty statements are any gauge, not many people are buying these books. I once told a Heinemann editor about my theory: “There are roughly only 3,000 teachers who buy books. They buy *a lot* of books. But they are the only ones buying.” The editor did not reply, but she got a very funny look on her face. I think my one good seller sold about 15,000 copies. Clearly not enough to spark a revolution.

## **Whining and Doing**

Yes, the complicity of our professional organizations plus the complicity of the unions has made the Common Core a done deal. But if you believe in heaven and hell, you know where the Standardistos who rob children of imagination and dreams will end up. But we can't wait for their damnation. As civil rights litigator and blogger Glenn Greenwald warns, “If a population becomes bullied or intimidated out of exercising rights offered on paper, those rights effectively cease to

exist.” This is what’s at stake. There are no excuses left. Either you join the revolt against corporate power or you lose your profession. And your self. Mississippi novelist and short story writer Barry Hannah, wrote, “The point is to strip down, get protestant, then even more naked. Walk over scorched bricks to find your own soul.” Maybe this is why the Feds and Bill Gates want us to stop reading fiction. I watch literacy stalwarts exhibit classic revisionary tactics, pretending this is a fight about how to teach spelling and grammar and what kids should be reading. I admit that Common Core impresario David Coleman’s arguments against fiction are so loony and so offensive, I easily fall into *that* diversion. But all these detours just mean we’re fiddling while Rome burns.

When teachers stoically keep their silence while corporate politicians shovel shit on them, they really can’t expect that tomorrow they’ll get roses. Or even less shit. I’m thinking of getting cards printed so I can distribute this message: **You deserve what you accept.** We can see the stages of teacher reaction to Common Core Standards: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression ... But please, please, we need to skip 'Acceptance' and move to resistance. Real resistance, not just Twitter/Facebook/blog complaint.

Whining is not the same thing as doing something. Whining is whining. Action is something else.

When I think of *doing*. I think of Don Perl, teacher activist in Greeley, Colorado. To the best of my knowledge, and I watch these things closely, Don was the first teacher to refuse to give the state tests. And he not only lived to tell about it but became the activists’ activist. Don leads a group at the Coalition for better Education that, right before testing season every year, erects billboards urging parents to opt their children out.

I can’t catalogue all the grassroots things Don does. I just know that whenever I come up with one campaign or another, Don will join in. For example, when, inspired by Hans Fallada’s account in *Every Man Dies Alone* of Otto and Elise Hampel, a working class couple who scattered postcards advocating civil disobedience throughout war-time Nazi-controlled Berlin, I came up with an anti-Common Core postcard, Don joined me in card distribution. The idea was to anonymously leave these postcards in bookstores, coffee shops, libraries, post offices, laundromats—wherever people gather. Whether it’s a CD of protest songs (*No Child Left Behind? Bring Back the Joy* <https://www.cdbaby.com/cd/dhbdrake4> ... still available by the way), or a book donation for Oglala College Library on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, I know Don will be there.

I’ve sold buttons, T-shirts, bumper stickers, a 94-page book, *When Childhood Collides with NCLB* (self-published so it would be cheap), thinking each campaign would spark a deluge of activism. When resolute activist teacher Elizabeth Jaeger wrote--and paid for the publication of—10,000 copies of her concise report “What Every Parent, Teacher, and Community Member Needs to Know About No Child Left Behind,” I stored the booklets in my garage. We hoped we could cover costs *and* start a revolution by asking people to buy in bulk--100 copies for \$50. The idea was that each buyer would distribute the booklet to 100 people, and the revolution would start. I advertised the booklet and took orders, hand-shipping around 9,000 booklets. That meant writing labels and taking packages to post office (not to mention buying the mailers). I began to understand those publisher handling fees. I have to admit I’m still smarting from being stung by the professor who enthusiastically ordered 200 copies but never paid me a dime. Despite dunning. Elizabeth and I did not break even financially on this venture. But the emotional toll was much worse. When we started I thought we’d have to get 100,000 more printed. But what I learned is

that there are not even 100 education activists in this country willing to pass out informational booklets.

There is a very good reason *Neoliberalism and Education Reform*, edited by E. Wayne Ross and Rich Gibson, is dedicated to George Schmidt. George, a longtime Chicago English teacher, is also the longtime publisher of *Substance*, the only education newspaper of dissent. In 1999, *Substance* published six of the widely criticized CASE tests (Chicago Academic Standards Examination). The Chicago Public Schools fired George, making sure he was blackballed in the entire area, and sued him for \$1.4 million. As George points out,

The issue was making all test content public after the tests have been given so that the public—not just ‘test experts’—can judge whether these tests actually measure and do what they are claimed to be doing by the experts and the media. It was a challenge in democracy when we published six of the CASE tests verbatim in *Substance* in January 1999, and by the time it was all over five years later, democracy had largely lost. The Board of Education had been awarded the right to fire me from a teaching job for work I had done at another job (editing *Substance*), the U.S. Supreme Court had refused to hear the case as a First Amendment case (thereby leaving a toxic Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals decision written by that reactionary icon, Richard Posner, as the last judicial word on the question), and the public was denied the right to examine every test that is used to bash teachers, ruin the lives of students, and mislead the world about the way public schools are working.

George has observed that, “Secret tests are more damaging to democracy than most secret things.” Certainly the Obama education policy is showing us how true this is. *Substance* persists, the only newspaper of education resistance in the country. Everyone who cares about the survival of public education should subscribe, sending along an extra contribution to keep this publication alive.

### **Being Faithful**

“You have to pedal and keep pedaling,” said *The New York Times* reporter Bruce Weber of his 4,199 bike trip across USA. Mother Teresa put it another way. Cormac McCarthy tells this story. When a reporter said, “You must get very discouraged,”—because she's dealing with dying people—Mother Teresa said, “Well, he didn't call upon me to be successful, he just called upon me to be faithful.”

As I look at all my unsuccessful campaigns to try to stir people up, I've decided to re-label. They aren't failures; they are examples of my faithfulness to the cause. And I can report that when, at 11:52 a.m., June 19, 2012, I get an unexpected, unsigned e-mail, it sustains me. All it says is “Bless you.” I don't even know who sent it.

Petitions don't work. Do you really think that dumping Arne Duncan will change one whit of education policy? Voting doesn't work (My bumper sticker reads “Republicans/Democrats: Same Shit, Different Piles”). If this testing mania were all about Pearson and McGraw-Hill and profits, why is the rest of the Business Roundtable so enthusiastic? I started writing about the need to create a scared, obedient workforce in the late 1990ies when I discovered what a dog Bill Clinton was (*One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards*). But few people get it. So-called Progressives still whine about the Conservative agenda. We need to heed Thomas

Pynchon's advice: "If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about the answers." Writing at Rouge Forum, Rich Gibson concedes that we are currently "poorly positioned in this real train wreck"—in part because our union leaders betrayed us—but also because "unionism, even at its best, cannot answer this international crisis."

What can we do? We can start with what we have, our own critical abilities and the limited organizations that exist that could create the solidarity necessary to build a resistance rooted in the reality of class struggle and the need for direct, on-the-job, action. The Rouge Forum would be one of a very few examples of groups that could do that. Justice demands organization.

Justice also demands a sense of moral right. Ethics. It is wrong to conduct venally graded racist high stakes exams without complaint. It is wrong to fail to say, "appearance is not essence, which is what you claim these exams measure," if for no other reason than if appearance always matched essence, there would be no science, but more importantly, to not resist is to become what you do.

Not to resist is to become what you do.

Being teachers, we are too polite. I think we need to take a cue from bad boy celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain, who called Paula Deen "greedy" and "cynical" for creating a brand based around "excess without guilt" and then, when diagnosed with Type 2 Diabetes, transmogrified into the spokesperson for the diabetes drug Victoza. Let's start calling out the gurus of Balanced Literacy, the former presidents of NCTE and IRA, the deans of education, *et al.* who are now selling books and offering professional development videos and courses on how to embrace the Common Core. Greedy and cynical.

But revolution starts out closer to home. Revolution starts with the poet Mary Oliver's advice, "Refuse all cooperation with the heart's death ..."

Refuse.

Walt Whitman was a bit more long-winded in the Preface to *Leaves of Grass*:

This is what you shall do; Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.

There are no excuses left. Either you join the revolution or you stand against the needs of children, and you aid the destruction of your own profession, not to mention democracy.

We MUST build a mass movement. Revolution is the only answer.



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ISSN 1920-4175

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