

CLASSROOMS, from page 8

"Imagine you are a speech writer for President Bush. Write the introductory paragraph of a speech to coalition forces after their victory in Iraq."

S.Z.: *What?*

B.B.: Now here's the deal: This is the adopted textbook in supposedly liberal, green Portland.

It also has three paragraphs on climate change and essentially blames poor countries as the reason that there hasn't been progress made on reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This is partly what happens when a community is not engaged in helping to shape the curriculum of the schools. Though this certainly doesn't reflect the politics of Portland, this is the official curriculum that is offered to our students. How does that happen?

S.Z.: *That's what I'm wondering. Oregon has adopted the Common Core (a set of educational standards adopted by most states). The time line suggests that this will all be in place by 2015.*

B.B.: No one really knows what the Common Core is going to do. There are people who like the Common Core, there are people for whom the Common Core is a liberation from the much more narrow and rote standards that they were dealing with before, and so it feels like a good thing. Until the tests hit, nobody knows what the Common Core means. That is where the standards will be known; not in the standards themselves, but in how they are assessed. And so we'll just have to wait and see what the Common Core means here, or anywhere.

S.Z.: *I saw a piece in The Washington Post recently that called out mega-textbook corporation Pearson because its sister non-profit was funneling millions of dollars fraudulently into Pearson.*

B.B.: Pearson is huge. They made something like \$9 billion in sales last year and that is who we're trusting to be the knowledge keepers for our children. And that's a problem.

So you've got Pearson, you've got Houghton-Mifflin and you've got McGraw-Hill. You've got this handful of giant corporations who are in charge of what our students ought to learn. And that's a problem because they have an interest in what children ought to learn and what they shouldn't learn.

They shouldn't learn to ask too many questions, they shouldn't learn to critique, they shouldn't learn to think that anything might be wrong with the capitalist system. They shouldn't think about change being the product of social movements. There are huge silences in corporate curriculum.

S.Z.: *Comedian Louis C.K. came out last week with a Twitter rant about his children's experience with the Common Core. He has a lot of sway with a large swath of Americans.*

B.B.: Yes, I was encouraged to see Louis C.K.'s critical tweets about the Common Core, and how his kids used to love math and now it makes them cry. As Diane Ravitch pointed out in her blog post about this, Bill Gates has spent hundreds of millions of dollars writing and pushing the so-called Common Core State Standards – and bribing education organizations to support them. But increasingly, parents, teachers and school principals are organizing against Common Core, and especially the tests used to assess them. In fact, the Oregon Education Association just passed a resolution denouncing the Smarter Balanced tests that the state of Oregon is trying to bring in to bully teachers to teach to. And parents throughout the country are opting their students out of taking the tests. Who knows how all this will turn out, but the organizing shows that just because wealthy and powerful people want something, doesn't mean that it will happen.

S.Z.: *What does it take to write and produce and teach good curriculum?*

B.B.: You know, that's a good question. It takes a measure of freedom. Teachers have to be able to talk with one another but also be able to imagine and to create and to test it out in their classes. It takes collaboration. It takes a commitment to seeing one's work as a part of an effort to make the world a better place.

S.Z.: *How then to get these more relevant curriculums into the hands of the teachers?*

B.B.: There may be some places where curriculum cops are coming into the classroom and are looking at the board to see whether or not some prescribed lesson is being taught, but actually teachers have some freedom to find alternatives.

The corporate curriculum is so bad and so narrow and so one-sided that it doesn't even live up to its own claims. It's not balanced. It doesn't offer multiple perspectives.

So when the Zinn Education Project comes along and offers, for example, a role-play on the U.S. war with Mexico, it's something that a lot of teachers gravitate toward. Instead of reducing (the lesson) to the United States and Mexico, it includes perspectives of women in occupied New Mexico, Mexican soldiers defending Mexico City, the Apache whose land was being fought over by the U.S. and Mexican soldiers, and the abolition movement. It's more participatory, it's more fun to teach, it's fuller and it just engages kids in ways that having them read a passage in the textbook and answer some questions at the end doesn't do.

One of the things that I do in my U.S. history class, is ask, "Who was that guy who they say discovered America?" And every hand will go up. "Christopher Columbus." And then I ask who did he discover, who was here? And a few students will say Indians and I'll agree, but what particular nationality? What were their names? Nobody. I've never had any students say the Taino. And I'll say, isn't that interesting? So we all know the guy, the name of this fellow who came from Europe, but none of us knows the names of the people who were here first. What does that say?

To offer them the fact that they have been given a one-sided history is powerful. It's important to not only teach a more accurate history, but to point out the inadequacies of the version they have learned via corporate textbooks.

S.Z.: *You co-authored a piece with Bill McKibben addressing climate change. The future seems pretty glum.*

B.B.: My little piece of this is trying to offer teachers the resources and the encouragement and the nudging to teach about the climate crisis in their classes. This is not really a part of the curriculum by and large because as I mentioned, this textbook – the only social studies textbook about the world – that kids have here in Portland has three paragraphs on the climate crisis. The second of which begins: "Not all scientists agree with the theory of the greenhouse effect ..."

S.Z.: *(Laughter) Unbelievable. Because some scientists are paid by ...*

B.B.: Yes. So this is the work of the environmental justice movement of the climate movement and educators together: that we have to shake things up. This is the greatest crisis facing humanity and we need to be alerting students and getting them to think critically about what has created this crisis and who is benefitting from it and who has an interest in our not doing anything about it.

For me and for Rethinking Schools, our charge is not just to pound the desk and to say we've got to be doing this, but is also to be finding teachers who are doing this work and give them a forum to share their experiences.

This is all of our work. I'm inspired by the work of Bill McKibben and as a grandpa, I don't know what the future holds, but I know that we don't have a right to say, "Well, we've lost." Hope is different than optimism. I may not be optimistic, but I have to be hopeful. And educators and activists working together can make a difference.

I don't know if I shared with you what I discovered teaching about coal: Scholastic partnered with the American Coal Foundation to produce a curriculum for fourth graders called "The United States of Energy," singing the praises of coal.

Now this is Scholastic. They should know better. They were hired and given who knows how much money by the coal industry. This curriculum was sent to tens of thousands of teachers around the country and was filled with all of the "advantages" of coal. There was not a single mention or moment in the curriculum that dealt with any of the problems with coal. Nothing on mountaintop removal coal mining, nothing on the coal miners, nothing on the climate crisis, nothing on mercury, nothing on asthma and lung disease and heart attacks.

We blew the whistle on this curriculum. I wrote a critique of it for Rethinking Schools and we partnered with the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood and then brought in a number of environmental justice groups: Greenpeace, the Center for Biological Diversity and demanded that Scholastic sever ties with the coal industry. The New York Times picked it up and then they wrote an editorial on it critiquing Scholastic for its bad judgment.

Scholastic cried "uncle" and agreed to pull down the curriculum and to apologize for this partnership. Of course they had all kinds of other partnerships too. They wrote a curriculum – a terrible and manipulative curriculum that they did for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce – that had energy politics similar to that of Dick Cheney. The thing is, these guys just have so much money and for a group like Scholastic, I imagine it is quite tempting to take the enormous sums of money that the Chamber of Commerce and the coal industry and Exxon and everybody else has to throw around.

S.Z.: *One of the reasons for this nationally standardized curriculum is to bring low-achieving children up to the achievement level of other students. It strikes me that this is certainly not the way to do that. The irony is, America's issues with education have more to do with childhood poverty than learning standards.*

B.B.: It's so hypocritical. If you really care about poor children, if you really care about the academic achievement of poor children, then let's start with raising the minimum wage to \$15. And let's actually, seriously pay attention to poverty and inequality; let's pay attention to kids' lives. But let's also take seriously the learning conditions of kids.

When I was teaching in Portland, a high school teacher taught five classes. Now, a high school teacher teaches six classes. They have more kids. If you really cared about kids and achievement, you would do more than just say, "We have higher standards." You'd actually try to put more resources into the conditions of teaching and learning – not to mention the conditions of their lives.

Corporations have an interest in what children ought to learn and what they shouldn't learn. They shouldn't learn to ask too many questions, they shouldn't learn to critique, they shouldn't learn to think that anything might be wrong with the capitalist system. They shouldn't think about change being the product of social movements. There are huge silences in corporate curriculum.