

Children of the Core

In his book, "More Than a Score: The New Uprising Against High-Stakes Testing," Jesse Hagopian brings together the voices of teachers, administrators, students and parents who resist the use of standardized tests because they believe they create an atmosphere of winners and losers

BY MIKE WOLD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

If you're not in some way involved with public schools, you may not be aware of the explosion of standardized testing in schools over the past 10 years. Preparing for and taking these tests has significantly affected teaching and learning on all levels in classrooms across the country.

Jesse Hagopian, a history teacher at Seattle's Garfield High School, has emerged as one of the leaders in what he calls a civil rights movement of this time: The growing unrest against high-stakes standardized testing in public schools. As editor of the new book "More Than a Score: The New Uprising Against High-Stakes Testing," Hagopian brings together the voices of teachers, administrators, students and parents who resist the use of standardized tests, which they believe create an atmosphere of winners and losers. That's because federal school funding gets tied to test scores; schools that don't improve test scores are closed or sanctioned; teachers are assessed on the "value" they've added to their students, based on a complicated statistical formula; and students are denied graduation if they don't pass certain tests.

While the latest version of high-stakes testing, related to the "Common Core" standards developed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, claims to address some of the issues with high-stakes testing, the basic premises — that standardized tests can measure critical thinking and that the best way to reform schools is to defund or close them when their students don't perform well — remains questionable. Opponents of high-stakes testing say that it makes no sense to blame teachers and schools for the educational problems caused by poverty and racism as social programs outside schools are defunded and schools and teachers are having to make do with fewer and fewer resources.

I sat down and talked with Hagopian about how he became a teacher, and why he was one of the leaders in the successful boycott last year of the MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) test at Garfield. We started by talking about how he got started in teaching.

Jesse Hagopian: My senior year at

Macalester College, I had taken courses about the history of struggles against oppression. I was asking them [my professors], "How can I apply the knowledge that I've learned here?" They recommended teaching.

Teach for America told me, "You can be part of the new civil rights movement. We're going to go into low-income and students-of-color schools, and we're going to help transform them."

Turns out five weeks of training isn't nearly enough to be an effective teacher. With few skills and little training, I learned a ton from my students in Washington, D.C.

My school served 100 percent African-Americans. I'd drive past the White House on my way to work. Ten minutes later I'm at my classroom. There was a hole in the ceiling. The first research project I'd ever assigned was destroyed by the rain.

It was the year of 9/11. We saw the smoke

rising from the Pentagon. I learned that our nation could find billions of dollars to bomb people halfway around the world, but they couldn't fix the hole in the ceiling. Serving a classroom where every single one of my students had a father or an uncle in jail and seeing the police roam our hallways, I saw the school-to-prison pipeline being constructed.

(That year), the No Child Left Behind Act came on line. I saw the rhetoric: "We need to hold teachers accountable, and we're going to do that by shutting down schools that have poor test scores." I saw this overemphasis on test scores, on using untrained teachers, and I knew they didn't have a genuine concern with improving education.

I came back to Seattle and went to the University of Washington to get my master's degree in education and then got my own

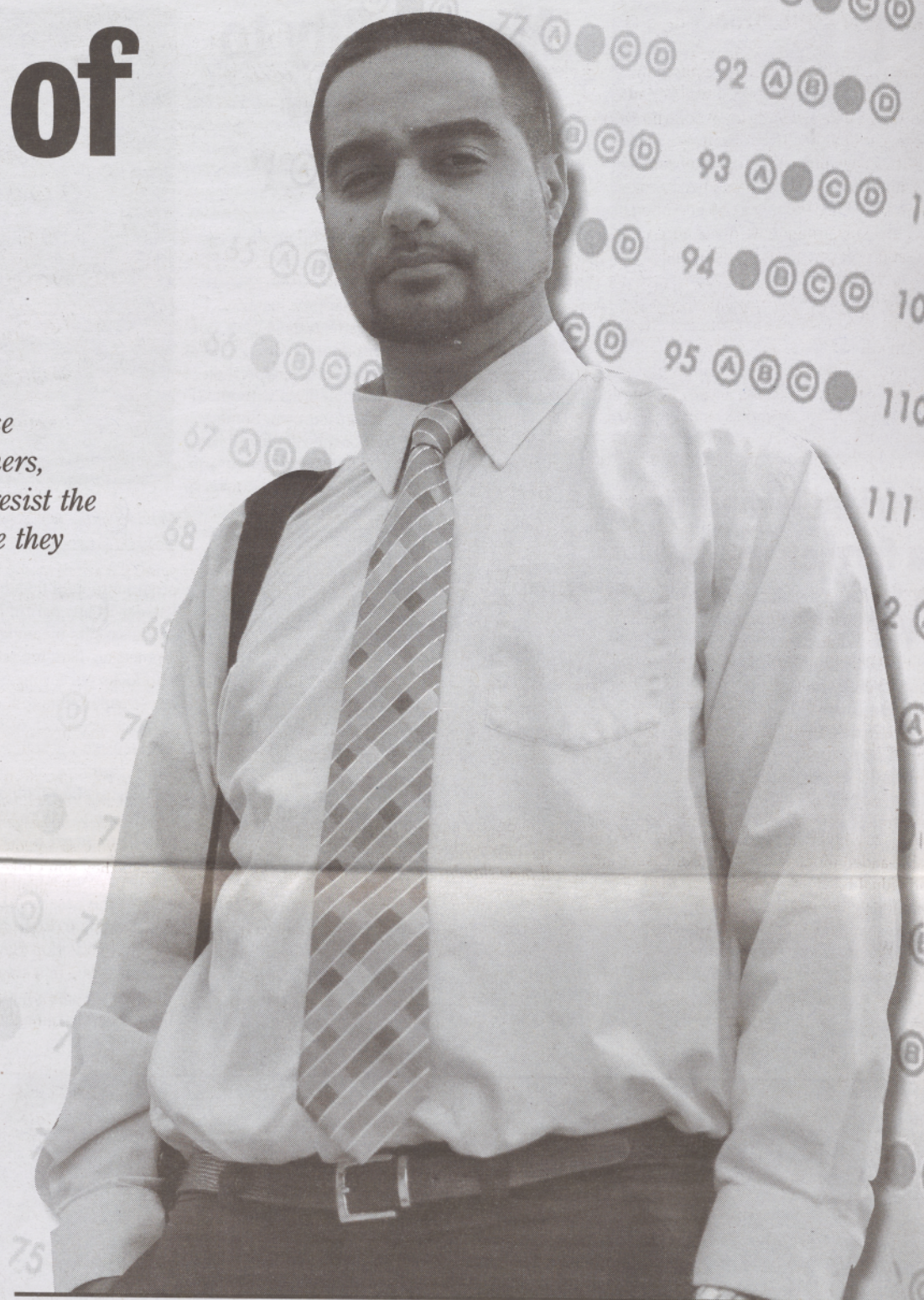


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