



Reforming Education Reform

Teachers fight Wall Street/politicians' war on schools by Alan Pittman

After a decade-long war on public education by Democratic and Republican presidents and Wall Street that has wracked schools with high-stakes bubble tests and crowded classes beyond fire codes, but has left kids no better educated, teachers are finally starting to fight back.

"Last year students at my school spent four to five weeks taking standardized tests, that doesn't even include the time they spent preparing for those tests," said teacher April LaCombe last week. LaCombe spoke through a bullhorn to a group of teachers protesting outside while U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan gave a speech to Oregon Business Association (OBA) executives in Portland. Duncan joined Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates last year in calling for larger class sizes and privatization of public schools.

"When Barack Obama was elected, we teachers rejoiced," said LaCombe, an east Portland teacher with 20 years of experience. "But with a heavy heart, we teachers watched those hopes disappear into thin air."

"This year I gave three standardized tests to my students within the first month of school," veteran teacher Joyce Rosenau told Obama's education chief in a Portland middle school packed with teachers who had come to educate Duncan about classroom reality before he met with the corporate group. "Those students had to do test prep work instead of their reading groups," Rosenau said. After the test cramming, "those students said they now hated reading," she said.

Schools "are no longer rich nurturing places where children became problem solvers and active participants in their own learning," Rosenau said. "I would ask you, Mr. Duncan, to remove the business model of education," she said to wild applause from the teachers.

The Gates and Walmart foundations, Facebook billionaire Mark Zuckerberg and other foundations headed by Wall Street hedge fund billionaires, technology executives and developers have worked closely with the Obama and Bush administrations and school districts to transform education into a corporate model

with a bottom line focused on privatization and testing. Although they face the concentrated power of the most powerful politicians and wealthiest tycoons in the world, a grassroots uprising of teachers is fighting back.

As Occupy Wall Street protests spread across the nation, a groundswell of teachers across the country are now fighting to end the bipartisan Wall Street occupation of public education. In July, thousands of teachers converged on Washington, D.C., for a Save Our Schools march on the White House. Local teachers plan to rally for better schools at noon this Saturday, Oct. 22, at the old Federal Building at 7th and Pearl.

If schools spend about 20 percent of their time on standardized testing, as some teachers claim, then the nation has spent more than a trillion dollars forcing kids to fill in bubbles over the last decade alone.

There's little to show for it. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the nation's most respected standardized test, shows scores that are essentially flat over the past three decades for 17 year olds. In international tests, the U.S. now trails far behind Finland, which has no standardized tests.

In Oregon, where Democratic Gov. John Kitzhaber has joined Republicans in pushing for using high-stakes tests to fire teachers and privatize schools, \$6 billion has been spent on testing over the last decade using the same formula with similar flat results on the NAEP.

Meanwhile, Colleen Works, the 2011 Oregon Teacher of the Year from Corvallis, said she struggles to educate the crowds of students crammed into her classes. "The Obama administration keeps talking about needing accountability for the teachers in the classroom, and yet I see no measure of accountability for those who are setting up the conditions that are set up to hold me accountable for my students when I have 199 students a day and less than 30 seconds for each one of them."

Obama hired Duncan to head the nation's schools even after the Chicago school system he ran failed to show significant progress on the NAEP. Duncan, who has no principal or teaching experience but did play professional basketball in Australia, went to a private high school with ample funding and small classes.

That private school pedigree is also shared by many of the other powerful politicians and billionaires pushing big

changes in public schools. Obama went to a private school in Honolulu and sends his kids to an expensive private school. Bill Gates went to a private high school that, like Duncan's private alma mater, is exempt from government testing requirements and markets itself for small class sizes.

In Oregon, Kitzhaber sent his son to a private school and just appointed a private school teacher to head his education efforts.

Duncan, Kitzhaber and Wall Street school reformers have pushed converting public schools into privately managed charter schools as part of their reforms.

But multiple studies have shown little evidence that charter schools are any better than public schools. While some are excellent, some are horrible and many are mediocre.

"The research is clear, 80 percent of charter schools perform no better and often worse than traditional public schools," Suzanne Cohen, a Portland seventh grade

degrees and "targeted increases in class size."

But Forest Grove teacher Suzanne Cordes questioned the Obama administration's spending priorities. "Those of us in the classrooms and working with Oregon students are extremely frustrated that our nation continues to spend hundreds of billions of dollars on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and we can't fund our programs and teachers in the classroom and even textbooks," she told Duncan to loud applause.

Other teachers questioned a high-stakes testing focus that penalizes teachers and schools for trying to help the hardest-to-teach students.

"Instead of punishing teachers for working with the students in the most impoverished neighborhoods, let's gain stable funding, secure housing and a child poverty rate that is far below the 22 percent that we have now," said LaCombe.

Kevin Mechling, the dean of students at Portland's Roosevelt High School, the poorest in the state, told Duncan, "We are held accountable for our students' success in a society that is unable to provide them with their basic needs, needs that include a roof over their heads and food on their plates. When the students come into our classrooms, they are already at a disadvantage."

Researchers have long known that family poverty is one of the greatest predictors of test performance. But testing advocates have dismissed consideration of poverty, calling it an excuse for bad teachers.

But raising test scores has often had little to do with education. The most effective way to boost scores is to get different students.

That happens when privately run charter schools skim off the most motivated families. Only the most stable families

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math and science teacher, told Duncan.

This year Kitzhaber cut a deal with Republicans to get more power for himself over schools in exchange for allowing for-profit online charter school companies to make big profits by diverting more money from state education funding.

The virtual schools have "limited accountability, oversight and transparency, and the largest one in Oregon failed to graduate 70 percent of its students," Cohen said.

This year private organizers of a hip-hop charter school in Portland spent \$500,000 in federal school money without ever opening for a day of class.

Last year Duncan argued to conservative executives at the American Enterprise Institute that funding cuts for education were the "new normal." The low funding "can, and should be, embraced to make dramatic improvements," he said. Duncan called for increasing emphasis on testing by linking bubble scores to teacher pay, reducing pay for teachers with master's

with the most educated and motivated parents are likely to enter or even know about charter admission lotteries months before school starts. Those parents' kids are already the most likely to succeed in school. Meanwhile, public schools are left with the least motivated families, special education kids and children learning English.

Another way to raise scores is to cram to the test. Studies have shown that cramming may raise scores on the target test, but does little to increase education and scores on other tests like the NAEP.

Another way is to simply cheat. Testing advocates hailed Atlanta's rising scores, but this year the district was wracked by the largest cheating scandal in the nation's history involving administrators and teachers at 44 schools.

Another way is to simply change the test. Many states have dumbed down tests to show increased scores.

Test-driven reformers have called on modeling school reform on corporate