

TEACHER ACTIVIST

Battling high-stakes testing BY DAEMON LEE

In the late 1980s, a third-grade student went with his mom to a parent-teacher conference and saw his score: There was the line that represented the average, and then he saw the dot, way below that, which represented him.

That student is now history teacher Jesse Hagopian, who works at Seattle's Garfield High School and serves as the advisor of the school's black student union.

"I knew from that moment until about halfway through college that I wasn't intelligent," he tells *EW* in a phone interview, recalling that first experience with a standardized test and his reaction to it. "And I could prove it to you and show you my test scores."

In March, Hagopian will speak in Eugene, along with his frequent collaborator, Wayne Au, a professor of education at University of Washington Bothell, as part of an event sponsored by local education advocacy group Community Alliance for Public Education (CAPE).

Hagopian's fight to advocate for his students — and against standardized tests like the one he took in third grade — has brought him national attention. He writes op-eds, speaks at rallies and, when the Washington State Legislature threatened to cut education funding, he staged a citizens arrest of the lawmakers that resulted in his own arrest. In 2013, he led his school in a successful boycott against a district-mandated test.

His visit comes at a crucial time. This spring, public school students across Oregon will gear up to take their own standardized test — the Smarter Balanced assessment — for the second year to evaluate their progress in aligning to the Common Core State Standards.

Last year was not without controversy: About 11 percent of students in Eugene's district opted out of the test, according to the Oregon Department of Education. In the Springfield School District, the opt-out rate was closer to 5 percent, similar to the overall average for Oregon.

Roscoe Caron, a member of CAPE and a retired teacher in Eugene School District 4J, says he hopes Hagopian's visit will help inform people about what is happening to public education. "There are billions of dollars at stake," he says, because of the large companies like Pearson that will profit from these new laws, selling the tests themselves as well as the books to help prepare for them.

"The only way to turn this around is, first and foremost, by people refusing to take the tests," Caron says.

Larry Lewin, also a retired teacher involved with CAPE, argues that the tests are not helpful for teachers because the students will be in a different class by the time the scores are released. "It's out of balance," he says. He adds that CAPE asked the Eugene School Board to take the new exams, but its members declined.

The message Hagopian will bring to Eugene is simple: Families who decide to forgo the test will not be alone. He rattles off numbers: 200,000 families in New York opting out of the Common Core-aligned test last spring, 60,000

JESSE HAGOPIAN



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