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These Seattle Teachers Boycotted Standardized Testing—and Sparked a Nationwide Movement

Diane Brooks

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Parents, students, and teachers all over the country have joined the revolt to liberate our kids from a test-obsessed education system.



Life felt eerie for teachers at Seattle’s Garfield High in the days following their unanimous declaration of rebellion last winter against standardized testing. Their historic press conference, held on a Thursday, had captured the attention of national TV and print media. But by midday Monday, they still hadn’t heard a word from their own school district’s leadership.

Then an email from Superintendent José Banda hit their in-boxes. Compared with a starker threat issued a week later, with warnings of 10-day unpaid suspensions, this note was softly worded. But its message was clear: a teacher boycott of the district’s most-hated test—the MAP, short for Measures of Academic Progress—was intolerable.

Jittery teachers had little time to digest the implications before the lunch bell sounded, accompanied by an announcement over the intercom: a Florida teacher had ordered them a stack of hot pizzas, as a gesture of solidarity.

“It was a powerful moment,” said history teacher Jesse Hagopian, a boycott leader. “That’s when we realized this wasn’t just a fight at Garfield; this was something going on across the nation. If we back down, we’re not just backing away from a fight for us. It’s something that educators all over see as their struggle too. I think a lot of teachers steeled their resolve, that we had to continue.”

Parents, students, and teachers all over the country soon would join the “Education Spring” revolt. As the number of government-mandated tests multiplies, anger is mounting over wasted school hours, “teaching to the test,” a shrinking focus on the arts, demoralized students, and perceptions that teachers are being unjustly blamed for deeply rooted socioeconomic problems.

“You’re seeing a tremendous backlash,” said Carol Burris, award-winning principal of South Side High School in New York City and an education blogger for *The Washington Post*. “People are on overload. They are angry at the way data and testing are being used to disrupt education.”

Last spring, New York became the first major state to implement Common Core State Standards testing, a key element of the Obama administration’s Race to the Top initiative. Burris has compiled data showing a dramatic increase in the time children and teens spend taking New York state tests. Fifth-graders are the hardest-hit, with testing time ballooning from 170 minutes in 2010 to 540 minutes in 2013.

Mark Naison, a professor at Fordham University in New York City, estimates that parents of about 10,000 students across the state joined the “opt-out” movement in April, refusing to submit their youth to Common Core tests. “Probably the largest test revolt in modern American history,” he said.

Inspired by New York’s grassroots revolution, Naison co-founded the Badass Teachers Association (BAT), which by mid-January had 36,443 members and chapters in all 50 states. Florida has the largest representation, with more than 1,575 BAT teachers.   
“It takes a lot of courage to speak out. This group says, ‘You’re not alone.’ If we stand up for one another, we can speak back,” Naison said. “We have brilliant people who know how to create websites, fan pages, a YouTube channel. We’ve got this amazingly flexible organization.”

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Secretary of Education Arne Duncan gave the opt-out movement a public-relations gift in November, when he labeled the emerging bloc of mainstream opponents to Common Core testing “white suburban moms who—all of a sudden—their child isn’t as brilliant as they thought they were, and their school isn’t quite as good as they thought they were.”

Duncan previously had blamed Tea Party extremists for Common Core’s bad rap. And indeed, conservative Republicans are among the program’s greatest critics. They see an alarming federal usurpation of control over local schools and are deeply suspicious of standardized curriculum requirements that they fear promote a liberal agenda.   
But on this issue, they’re joined by progressive Democrats—including the BAT contingent—who are outraged that teachers and schools might be blamed and punished for low test scores. Multiple-choice tests on a handful of subjects can’t measure a teacher’s impact on students’ lives or provide meaningful insights into student learning, they say.

“Instead of dealing with issues of poverty, racially isolated schooling, a lack of social services in communities, this [policy] is built on test scores,” said Burris.   
Or, as BAT co-founder Priscilla Sanstead says in her Twitter banner: “Rating a teacher in a school with high poverty based on their student test data is like rating a dentist who works in Candyland based on their patient tooth decay data.”

**How did we get here?**

David Labaree, a professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Education, traces the federal government’s creeping control over classrooms back to the Cold War era, when the Sputnik launch triggered the Space Race. In the ’70s and ’80s, fears that the Russians were getting ahead of the United States gave way to worries about the Japanese and Germans. Now it’s the Chinese, he said.

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The ’70s marked the first time “high stakes” tests began to emerge, with impacts on grade promotions and graduation requirements, Labaree said. Until then, teachers had a great deal of autonomy over textbook selection and classroom practices; schools were considered successful if graduates found jobs and social mobility was taking place.

The standards movement promoted a narrow emphasis on academic curricula—mostly math and English, plus some science and social studies—as a key element of the U.S. race for economic and political supremacy in the international arena, he said. The modern trend toward “high stakes” tests, which can carry significant impacts on teachers’ careers, has profoundly changed what is—and isn’t—taught.

“It broke down the classroom door,” Labaree said. “It puts a huge pressure on teachers to toe the line and start teaching to the test. It’s changed the nature of a teacher’s work in a way that’s quite devastating. ‘Look, I’m part of a machinery here to raise test scores. I’m not really a teacher any more, I’m just an efficient delivery system of human capital skills.’ That’s the new language.”

**Race to the Top**

The “accountability” movement got a big boost in 2002, when President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act. For the first time, all public schools receiving federal funding were required to test students every year in grades three through eight, plus once during high school, using standardized state tests in math and reading.

President Barack Obama and Secretary Duncan unveiled the Race to the Top contest in 2009. To be eligible for a share of the program’s $4.35 billion in grants, states were required to adopt the Common Core standards for math and language arts. Forty-five states and the District of Columbia fully signed up. Texas, Virginia, Alaska, and Nebraska declined any participation. Minnesota partially joined, rejecting the math standards.

Among the requirements: using test results to evaluate teachers.  
Now many states are rethinking their commitment to Common Core. Eight states have reversed, suspended, or significantly delayed implementation. Legislatures in other states continue to debate the issues.

Some states are backing out because of technology issues. Oklahoma, for instance, found that just one in five schools had enough Internet bandwidth and computers to administer the tests, a state official told Education Weekly. And the state projected that classroom time devoted to taking the tests would jump from two or three hours to nine hours.

Seattle’s Garfield High teachers cite similar technology issues in their litany of testing complaints. The MAP test, for instance, forced the closure of all three Garfield computer labs for four months of each school year.

Seattle teachers’ contracts allow MAP results to be used in their evaluations, even though an official from the company that created the test has expressed concerns about the appropriateness of such use. The school district administration says teacher evaluations do not currently include MAP scores.

Garfield’s testing coordinator, Kris McBride, planted the seeds of revolution in December 2012 when she told frustrated remedial-reading teacher Mallory Clarke, “You can refuse to give the test!” The two women first sought—and won—support from the language arts and math departments, then asked for the backing of the entire teaching staff. With a few abstentions, Garfield teachers unanimously voted to support a boycott of the January-February cycle of MAP tests. “This was the crux: It was just immoral to rob the students of that [classroom] time,” Clarke said. “The feeling in the building was just simmering under the surface, waiting for something to do about it.”

Garfield teachers sent Banda’s office multiple letters, emails, and voicemails after their December vote, with no response, McBride said. So on Jan. 10, 2013, they staged their press conference.

**Support for the boycott**

The national ripples were immediate.

“Bravo to the teachers of Garfield High. We support you and thank you for your courageous stand,” wrote Jane Maisel, a leader of the anti-testing group Change the Stakes, in an email to Hagopian.

A February 6 National Day of Action in support of Garfield teachers inspired rallies across the country. In Chicago, for instance, parents at 37 schools gathered signatures on anti-testing petitions. Banda’s office was “bombarded” with emails, Hagopian said.

An International Day of Action on May Day brought support from teachers and parents in Japan, Australia, and the United Kingdom, he said.

In the weeks and months following the Garfield declaration, teachers at six other Seattle schools joined the MAP boycott. When Banda’s office ordered school administrators to give the test anyway, local families added power to the revolt, with about 600 students opting out of the winter tests.

Banda convened a task force to study the issue, and in May he announced a partial reversal of district policy: MAP testing now is optional for the district’s high schools. Despite the early threat of 10-day unpaid suspensions, no teachers have been punished for refusing to administer the MAP.

“This wasn’t just a victory against one test,” Hagopian said. “This was a victory for a key concept: that teachers should be consulted about issues like testing and what kinds of learning are best for our students—before districts go to high-paid consultants and billionaires for solutions.” (In January 2014, Hagopian announced he was running for president of the Seattle teachers union to build on that victory.)

Meanwhile, Education Spring was busting out across the country, with rallies, marches, test boycotts, and teach-ins. The most dramatic: an estimated 10,000-plus educators and parents from all over New York converged at the state capitol in Albany for a June 8 “One Voice United” demonstration.

Hagopian has been sought out by schools and local unions across the country; he has traveled from Hawaii to Florida telling the Garfield story and helping other educators resist standardized tests.

**More effective assessment**

During his travels, Hagopian learned of the New York Performance Standards Consortium, a coalition of 28 high schools across the state. Coalition schools track student progress with performance-based assessments. Rather than take standardized tests, students do in-depth research and papers; learn to think, problem-solve, and critique; and orally present their projects. He says this approach not only provides more effective student assessment, but also emphasizes critical-thinking skills over rote learning.

Last fall, two Garfield teachers and principal Ted Howard visited consortium schools at the Julia Richman Education Complex, in Manhattan, and returned inspired.  
Successful students have a true joy for learning, Howard said, which the modern focus on testing has stripped from classrooms. Consortium schools support teaching as an “art form,” he said, rather than a robotic exercise to raise test scores.

“We’re dealing with human beings and human behavior, and sometimes that’s not quantifiable,” Howard said. “Students [at consortium schools] are saying, ‘Hey, I really want to be here.’”

In February he plans to send two more teachers to New York to visit another, larger consortium high school.

“I got into education for the long haul,” Howard said. “Hopefully, we can get together to change education, to make it better. It won’t change overnight, so we have to stick with it. We speak for students who don’t have a voice, so we have to hang in there.”  
Next fall, Washington will be among many states launching the Common Core standards and tests. Opt-out activists across the nation predict that a second, even more vibrant Education Spring is nigh.

"It’s gonna to be huge,” said BAT’s Naison. “I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s 100,000 [students opting out] in New York next spring.” He also predicts significant uprisings in California, Florida, Illinois, and perhaps Texas.

Now he’s planning an epic March on Washington—an upbeat three-day event culminating with a July 28 march to the U.S. Department of Education.

“It’s going to be a very festive,” he said, with flash mobs, plays, songs, and a band. “Imagine 10,000 teachers, parents and kids—some in costumes, some playing instruments, with huge banners—demanding that teacher and student creativity be unleashed.”

“It’s going to be the party of the year,” Naison said. “It’s to celebrate what teaching and learning can be, and to shame the people who are taking the fun and creativity out of it.”

*Diane Brooks wrote this article for*[***Education Uprising***](http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/education-uprising/education-uprising)*, the Spring 2014 issue of YES! Magazine. Diane is a journalist and communications consultant.  She was a newspaper reporter for many years in Seattle and the San Francisco Bay Area, and now lives in Everett, Wash.*[*priestdi.com*](http://priestdi.com/)*.*

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