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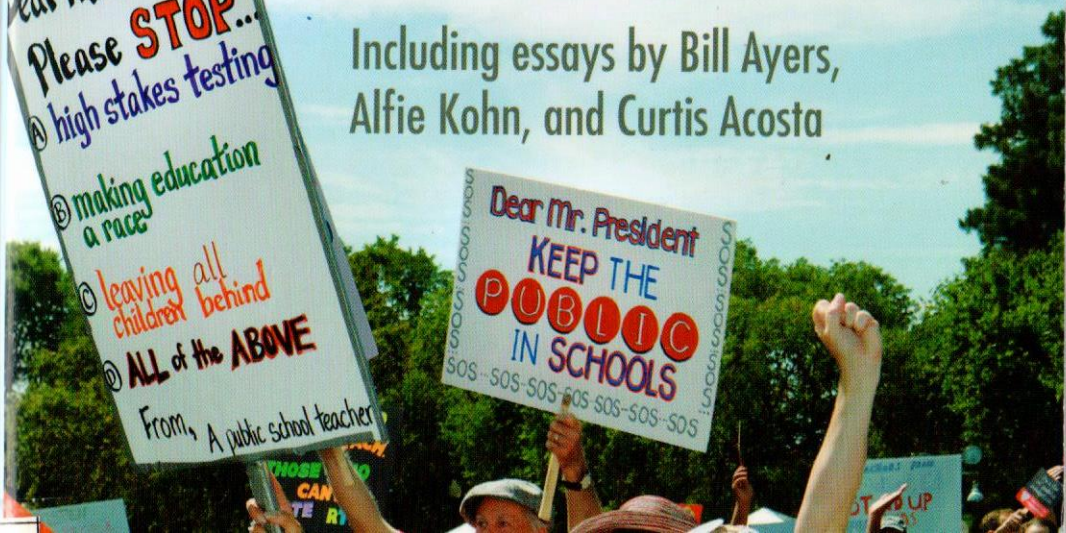
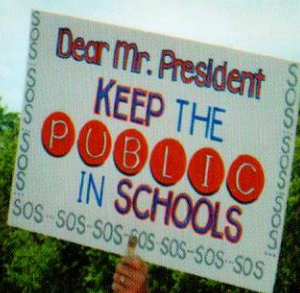
# EDUCATIONAL COURAGE

Resisting the Ambush  
of Public Education

"This book helps us to be audacious in our  
activism and in our vision."

—from the Foreword by Deborah Meier

Including essays by Bill Ayers,  
Alfie Kohn, and Curtis Acosta



# Educational Courage

Resisting the Ambush of Public Education

Nancy Schniedewind and  
Mara Sapon-Shevin

Beacon Press, Boston

*Dedicated to the educational courage of all those  
struggling for more democratic schools and to  
Julia Grace Schniedewind and Rhoda Myra Ginsberg Sapon*



**BEACON PRESS**

25 Beacon Street  
Boston, Massachusetts 02108-2892  
www.beacon.org

Beacon Press books  
are published under the auspices of  
the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

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Printed in the United States of America

15 14 13 12 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper that meets the uncoated paper  
ANSI/NISO specifications for permanence as revised in 1992.

Text design and composition by Wilsted & Taylor Publishing Services

A version of "A Nationwide Action to Save Our Schools" originally appeared on SocialistWorker.org, August 2, 2011. "The Wisconsin Uprising," pieces by Bob Peterson, Stephanie Walters, and Kathy Xiong, originally appeared in *Rethinking Schools* (Spring 2011). It is reprinted with permission. "Debunking the Case for National Standards," copyright © 2010 by Alfie Kohn, was originally published in *Education Week* (January 2010). It is reprinted with the author's permission. "Arizona Students Protest New Law Banning Ethnic Studies Classes" is reprinted with permission from Democracy Now! "Pensamiento Serpentine" appears in *Luis Valdez—Early Works*, copyright © Arte Público Press (University of Houston). It is reprinted with permission. "The Curie 12" originally appeared in *City Kids, City Teachers: Reports from the Front Row*, William Ayers and Patricia Ford, eds. (New Press, 2008). "The Struggle against Mayoral Control in Milwaukee" was originally delivered as a speech at the Ninth Trination Conference for the Defense of Public Education, Montreal, May 8, 2010.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Educational courage : resisting the ambush of public education /  
[edited by] Nancy Schniedewind and Mara Sapon-Shevin.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8070-3295-4 (pbk.)

1. Public schools—United States. 2. Democracy and education—United States.  
3. Educational change—United States. I. Schniedewind, Nancy.  
II. Sapon-Shevin, Mara.

LA217.2.E385 2012

370.973—dc23

2012009323

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## Foreword

For thirty years, between 1968 and 1998, I was a part of a surprisingly vigorous educational reform movement that was slowly creeping its way into the mainstream. One part of me recognized that it was unlikely that the largely conservative political climate would be comfortable soil for seeding the kind of liberatory education I envisioned, but another part thrived on a growing consensus on what good schooling might look like. Or so it seemed to me, in that part of the public school “establishment” I found myself in.

As one of the founders of Central Park East School in New York City, I had the opportunity to work with teachers and students who modeled democracy and valued teacher and student voices. Despite the challenges of creating a school that went against the grain, I had daily victories, those wonderful, precious moments when I could see and enjoy the miracle we had created. I’d stop in the hallway and look both ways and feel such a swell of joy that it carried me over the bumps in the road. I listened to the unauditioned chorus with wonder; that’s what democracy sounds like, I thought. We had created a community that was sometimes less than ideal but was always a shared cross-generational community. Parents, teachers, other staff, and students knew they were in it together. Progressive educator Lillian Weber insisted on putting her finger on the essential core principle; we needed to create adult communities of learners to tackle the issues facing us together, what we had originally called “open corridors.” Lillian spoke her mind to power whenever she could and led us to cracks we hadn’t dreamed existed, much less dared to test out in practice, and eventually to rebuilding hundreds of schools throughout New York City and beyond.

Today we mourn the loss of some of that work. But what I fear more would be losing the tough-minded understanding of what’s needed. While we excitedly chanted the newest slogan, “This is what democracy looks like!” in Madison, Wisconsin, in the spring of 2011, or in Washington, DC, at the July 2011 Save Our Schools

rally, we also realized that we don't want to slip into a simplification. Democracy is not just a rally or even a chorus. The togetherness that democracy depends on, we've learned, is far more complicated than marching or even singing together. Democracy is hard—hard to envision sometimes—and even harder to achieve. But struggle we must.

The kind of democracy we envision may be utopian, but efforts to create something closer to such an ideal are never fruitless. When I've been accused of being naive I've cringed, and yet there's truth to it. There's a kind of naïveté we dare not lose. Idealism is not a character flaw; it's a way of visualizing what could be and might be.

Schools that do not give us, our families, and our students a chance to experience the complexity of democracy—even down to such details as who should vote, and on what—deprive children of something they desperately need to learn about. Disagreements that we so carefully try to hide from the young are precisely what the young need to learn about, thoughtfully and mindfully. When we try to hide from children the complexity of creating democratic schools—when we make the struggles and the disagreements and the battles invisible—we deny young people the opportunities to understand how important and challenging this work is. Children learn most efficiently as apprentices to experts, even imperfect experts. Only when we adults accept and model the ways we wrestle with the complex challenges we struggle with—as teachers, administrators, and citizens—can our schools become places where children will learn to be responsible adults too.

What do we need now? We desperately need democratic schools. Democracy was invented as a form of accountability. By listening to and valuing every voice, we make it much more likely that we are paying attention to what's really happening and are being responsible to those with whom we interact. And democratic schools are the way to build accountability for education.

And we need resistance to the continuing assault on public education that reduces schools to market-driven factories that select and

sort our students, distorting visions of communities of learning and growth and activism. We can't internalize the norm that's out there and can't accept that this is "the way things have to be." We mustn't adjust to injustice, losing our visions, our hope, and our active resistance.

One of the most powerful ways to resist the dominant, suffocating narratives that surround us—about what's wrong with schools, about blaming teachers, about the benefits of privatized education—is to create alternative images and share alternative data.

And perhaps the most persuasive forms of "alternative data" are our stories. Our lives—our lived experiences—are our data. Test scores are, at best, indirect evidence of what is happening in schools for children, but our lives and stories are the *real* data. When we sit down with a child and listen to her read, we have much more useful and powerful evidence of that child's reading skills than through viewing a test score.

This book provides us with *real* data about what market-driven educational policies have done to our students, our teachers, and our educational system. And the stories here are also the real evidence of what resistance looks like and what is possible when people work individually and collectively to teach in the cracks and to create different realities for children in schools. Corporate-driven educational initiatives undermine teachers' judgment and knowledge; they deny the most important source of data that we have, the perceptions and understandings of those closest to the action. While school improvement may be slow, to be effective it must be based on teachers', parents', and students' reality—their own understanding of the lives of children.

This book is all about stories. Stories of pain, stories of hope, stories of possibility, stories of vision, and then, perhaps most significantly, stories of activism and change. Storytelling is an art and it's the root of our literacy; this book helps us to become more literate about the world of school and the possibilities of real school change that is rooted in the real lives of children and classrooms. I believe that the stories shared in this book can open our eyes, broaden

our perspectives, and engage us in powerful discussions of what is and what still can be.

In order to make things better, we need solidarity, but not a form of lockstep solidarity in which we sign on to one another's reality without close scrutiny. To work together, we need to look for the commonness between us—the places in which we can combine our gifts, our skills, and our visions to make schools truly democratic institutions that work for all students (and their teachers and their parents too).

This book helps us to be audacious in our activism, visions, and desire for audacious children who will challenge the status quo and move us forward. Gandhi said that we must be the change we wish to see in the world; in order for our children to be strategic and courageous, we must be strategic and courageous ourselves. The stories in the book help us to become the change we wish to see in the world.

At this critical time in our struggle, we need initiative, courage, imagination, and creativity. We need to believe in the value of each and every human being. And we need voices of courage.

I invite you to listen to the voices in this book and find your own courage—educational courage—to make a difference in the world.

—Deborah Meier

## Preface

High standards? Accountability? Success for all? What could be wrong with these goals for education? Who could be against wanting all children to learn and succeed in school?

But wait! What if the ways these ideas are being articulated and enacted don't actually take us where we want to go? What if the standards that are set aren't reasonable? What if the people setting the standards don't really understand the students they're imposing the standards on? What if the teachers are being held accountable for things that keep them from reaching many other meaningful educational goals for their students? And what if the rhetoric of success for all has actually resulted in the systematic failure of large numbers of students and schools that don't have the resources that more privileged students have?

This book is about the real lives of teachers and students who have been caught in a firestorm of educational rhetoric and putative educational policies that are undermining public education and their courageous reactions to it. You will read narratives of those who have resisted what is hurtful to children and families.

This book is full of personal stories because we believe that the truth of what is happening in the schools is best represented by the words of those who are there. And, because we have asked others to share their personal stories, we begin with our own stories.

Who are we? How did we come to write this book? What educational experiences shaped our own educational philosophies and understanding of best practice?

Nancy's story depicts the powerful potential of public education, and how very different it is from what market-driven educational policies have forced public education to become today. Mara's story describes her experiences with the problematic aspects of her school experience—such as an overemphasis on competition, a narrowing of the curriculum, and useless assessments—that are hallmarks of market-driven education today.

**Nancy's Story**

I was fortunate to have a fourth-grade teacher who shaped my vision of what public education in a democracy could be. Mrs. Burns built a community of children where we all learned to the highest standards. For example, my classmates and I recited challenging poetry and worked together to solve tough math problems. While Mrs. Burns played the piano, she led us in spirited singing of classic songs from the 1920s to 1950s. With students, she organized recess games for the whole class, so boys weren't playing baseball while girls played hopscotch and others stood alone on the playground.

From her teaching, we learned that we could live very happily in a classroom community where we all achieved because we helped each other, respected each other despite our significant differences, worked hard, made decisions together, and experienced zest, fun, and care. In public school, we experienced a democracy and learned the possibilities for a democratic society.

When I began teaching, I sought a teaching situation where I could foster democracy through public education. Teaching primarily African American students in a large, urban high school, I integrated into my social studies curriculum African American history and current civil rights issues. I expanded my curriculum to connect to my students' lived experiences and helped them create positive visions for the future.

In the late 1960s, the Philadelphia Public Schools created a wide variety of alternative schools within the public school system. They were not charter schools that got public money without accountability, but innovative schools within the school district. I transferred to an alternative high school, collaboratively run by the school district, the University of Pennsylvania, and a local community organization. A large Victorian building housed two hundred students for whom part of the curriculum was community-based. At least one day a week, each student worked in a grassroots organization or in another local internship.

Despite the ongoing, inevitable challenges of educating young

people whose families were struggling to survive, most students thrived. Poor readers learned to read when introduced to the stories of Richard Wright, students developed pride in themselves and their community, and former gang members visited colleges with their teachers and went on to enroll. This was meaningful, public education enabling our students to go on to become teachers, lawyers, community leaders, and more.

There were very few standardized tests and scripted curricula, and no merit pay in this experience of public education. I taught because I had a commitment to young people, democracy, and social change. I still teach not to create workers for corporate America but to foster the development of intelligent, critical, caring persons who can contribute to the public good in their personal and professional lives. My hope is that we can reframe and reclaim public education today for the common good.

**Mara's Story**

My understandings of what schools could be like—and should be like—was shaped early in my life by living and going to school in three countries before I was eight. First grade in Spain and second grade in Scotland taught me that there are many different ways to see the world, and I returned to third grade in the United States already committed to inclusion and diversity.

Although I always did well in school academically, I also realized early on that many of the ways in which schools were structured—with a focus on competition and individual achievement—stood in the way of collaborating and developing meaningful relationships. I often found myself in situations in which I had to make an active choice between “doing well” and “having friends,” a choice I continue to feel no child should have to make.

When I became a teacher of a group of six- to eight-year-old students who were labeled as having “special educational needs,” I saw immediately the negative results of isolating students who were perceived as different. My own isolation as “the special education



teacher” also kept me from developing collaborative, cooperative relationships with other teachers. I worked hard to create a classroom in which students were encouraged to help one another and to celebrate each other’s success.

My teaching experience also taught me, sadly, that many of the things that I thought were best for my students were disallowed by those in positions of power who—although they had never met my students—thought they knew better what those children needed. This experience shaped my belief in the importance of honoring teachers’ knowledge and understanding of children’s education. Frustrations with policies that were developed by those with minimal relationships to children and their families were clearly a barrier to achievement and the development of family and community connections.

My teaching now focuses on the importance of developing caring, safe, and nurturing communities as the essential groundwork for successful education at any level. I believe that good teaching is about building relationships, and I challenge policies and practice that damage or destroy a sense of community or collective action.

#### **Our Collaboration**

The two of us met in 1985 when we attended a conference of the International Association for the Study of Cooperation in Education. We were both passionately interested in ways to structure teaching and learning that had students work together actively and that used peer support as a primary method of instruction, preparing students to become citizens in democratic communities.

From our initial meeting, we went on to work, present, and write together, focusing our work on what we called “socially conscious cooperative learning”—cooperative learning used to help students become active agents in working for social justice and aware of the importance of their own positive interactions and support. These are the values and practices that we believe are crucial to bring back into public education today.

#### **Nancy’s Resistance Story**

For the past fifteen years, I’ve written columns and letters in area newspapers about the dangers of high-stakes testing with examples of more effective ways to assess learning, the lack of evidence to support federal educational policy, the loss of local educational control of public education, and the undermining of multicultural education. I’ve worked in our union to push back against harmful educational policies and marched in Albany, New York, and Washington, DC, to preserve public education. Two stories of organized resistance stand out.

In 2000, a new superintendent in my school district sought to change the district’s progressive, student-centered educational policies to ones that were authoritarian and test-based. Working together with other parents and some teachers, we organized the Education Network, a community-based group committed to educational advocacy. We held public forums on topics such as the problems with standardized testing, wrote newsletters, spoke at school board meetings, and organized others to join. Our members, including me, ran for the school board in the next few years and won seats. Our school district now has a different superintendent who does what’s possible to put testing in its proper place and supports education with young people at the center.

The result of efforts to push back conservative initiatives at my own institution weren’t as positive. In 2003, for example, the college president at that time eliminated much of the K–12 teacher access to a highly regarded, progressive graduate program in multicultural education. With others—students, faculty, alumni, area educators, national multicultural education leaders, and New York State teacher unions—we organized many voices to try to turn this decision around. These voices weren’t heeded. We experienced a painful loss to these same ambushing policies at work in public higher education.

In both struggles, however, it was the collective effort that was most memorable. The camaraderie, cooperation, and engagement

of people working together toward a common goal made our efforts meaningful and life affirming. As we work in our communities and nationwide to challenge threats to public education, whether we meet rewarding victories or intransigence, relish the journey.

### **Mara's Resistance Story**

My resistance stories focus on attempts to address policies and practices that are discriminatory and oppressive to those in marginalized groups. A commitment to create schools that are inclusive and respond positively to difference is seriously challenged by practices that focus on ranking, competition, and attempts to reward the performances of students and teachers. When teachers are rewarded for the performances of their students, there is a serious disincentive to accept and include students who present learning and behavioral challenges.

I have also served as an expert witness in due process hearings for students and their families who are seeking more inclusion in their public schools. When a twelve-year-old student whom I'll call John entered sixth grade, all the supports and accommodations he had previously received, which had enabled him to be in a typical classroom, were removed. In the name of "high standards" and uniform curriculum, his teachers were forced to treat him "like all the other kids," which meant that he failed time and time again. It took a lawsuit (and a lot of money) for the district to acknowledge and respond to John as an individual rather than as a set of data points. In this case, as in other cases across the country, many educators, researchers, and activists have worked together collaboratively against the identification, labeling, and segregation based on test scores and worked to ensure that we see students as full and complex human beings who cannot be reduced to numbers.

In my work on addressing issues of racism and homophobia in education, I have seen, time and time again, how the current focus on high-stakes testing and a standardized curriculum has made it extremely difficult for teachers to focus on the essential community building and attention to peer interaction that is critical to student

achievement and growth. Many teachers have come to me distraught that they are not allowed to address issues of bullying and racism that occur in their classrooms because test preparation has usurped their time and trumped their abilities to be thoughtful and responsive to students and school communities. In an effort to address the critical classroom climate issues these teachers raised, a group of us organized a "Teaching Respect for All" conference on our campus at Syracuse University. We were committed to sharing strategies and deepening the conversation about how to create democratic, inclusive educational programs in which all students are supported and safe. The conference drew so much interest that we had to change the venue to accommodate the teachers, administrators, parents, and students who wanted to be part of this activist strategizing.

### **Conclusion**

By sharing our accounts of the promise and pitfalls of public education in our own experience and by sharing experiences of our resistance to market-driven education, we hope to encourage you to similarly reflect on your experiences. Our own stories can shed light on what is valuable and what is hurtful to public education. You too may have accounts of resistance to harmful policies that are the seeds of further change.

We believe that, despite the grave threat to public education today, we can collectively turn the tide. We hope the vision in this book will encourage you to hold on to hope and join with others to reclaim public education for the public good.

—*Nancy Schniedewind and Mara Sapon-Shevin*

## Introduction

This book is a chronicle of courage, hope, and inspiration. It offers the voices of those who are resisting legislation, policies, and practices that are inconsistent with a democratic vision of education and society. Rather than simply lamenting what is happening in our schools, these people are actively finding ways to foster educational equity for all in the face of significant odds. Educational reformer Deborah Meier says, "Resistance to nonsense is one of the greatest powers of human beings."

The sound bites about "school reform" that we hear on the news are deceptive; the voices in this book are the real, seldom-heard accounts of those on the ground making a difference. Charts and graphs cannot tell us what it is like to teach in a kindergarten that has eliminated play, or what it is like to be forced to administer tests that you know your students cannot pass. It is through stories of the people who are in schools and communities that we can craft a picture of how education is being undermined and of how courageous people can make a difference.

This book tells stories of educators, parents, students, and community members who are individually and collectively fighting for public education that affirms young people and works for the common good. The voices here represent hundreds of thousands of others who continue to protest the policies that have damaged millions of young people and that have the potential to destroy public education. We hope this book encourages those who value public education to speak up and push policymakers in democratic directions. We hope readers will be able to envision and support alternatives to what is and work to transform current educational and other social policies and practices into those that nourish all young people.

The purpose of public education in a democracy is to provide a meaningful, challenging, and equitable education for all students, one that sets high academic expectations without regard to race, class, gender, family of origin, or language. Equally important is

that students learn to participate in a democratic society and work with people different from themselves. We imagine schools in which students view one another as vital resources and understand that a successful society is one in which no person is discarded or disenfranchised. We work for diverse, inclusive school environments where thoughtfulness, care, and cooperation help prepare students to be critical thinkers, problem solvers, and active participants in their local and broader communities.

Educational policies driven by market concerns ambush the possibility for this kind of democratic education. High-stakes testing, voucher programs, corporate-connected charter schools, test-driven teacher evaluation, merit pay, mayoral control, and national standards put private corporations at the helm of education, rather than the public. Our educational system is being privatized and, in the process, our democracy is threatened.

### **The Educational Courage of Resisters**

This book describes the reality of public schools and presents the stories of those who have had the courage to resist market-driven policies and practices from the initiation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002 to 2011. The voices in the book reflect different kinds of resistance, with people saying no in a variety of ways. While some spend their energy working within the system to provide meaningful education for young people, others concurrently take actions to resist them. Still others focus their energy on organizing collective activity to challenge ambushing practices at the local, state, and national levels. Many integrate all these approaches.

Part I, “Is This What We Call ‘Education?’” includes a history of the current ambush of public education and the effects of ill-considered federal legislation on young people, educators, parents, and communities. A teacher and parent describe what has happened to their teaching and to young people because of these policies and courageously dissent in a time characterized by conformity and fear. These accounts can help raise consciousness about the reality of schools today, a necessary place to start a movement for change.

The voices in part II, “‘I Won’t Be a Part of This!’—Educators, Parents, Students, and Community Members Resist,” represent many thousands of other people across the country who, as individuals and small groups, have resisted the current, top-down educational agenda. Some resist by writing op-ed pieces; some publicly say no by refusing to take a test or resigning from a charter school that has “gone corporate.” Others resist by organizing neighbors to change testing policies detrimental to English-language learners. By refusing to be silent, this group of writers gives courage to others who may think about similar actions.

“Resisting by ‘Working in the Cracks’—Creating Spaces to Teach Authentically,” part III, describes how educators, even when constrained, create space within the current system to teach authentically. Committed to developing students’ intellectual, social, and emotional learning, they explain how they foster socially just classrooms and schools and keep their teaching vibrant and curriculum relevant despite test-driven constraints. An encouraging account from one public alternative school, included on the *Educational Courage* website ([www.beacon.org/educationalcourage](http://www.beacon.org/educationalcourage)), shows that “choice” for students and families is possible without the privatizing demands of charter schools. These stories of creativity, resilience, and perseverance will inspire other educators to find the cracks in their own educational settings where they can teach with young people at the center.

“‘Not My Voice Alone’—Organizing to Reclaim Public Education,” part IV, presents ways in which students, educators, parents, and community members have articulated alternative visions for public education and fought for meaningful change. Whether they’re resisting paying teachers for test scores, organizing against charter school takeovers, fighting mayoral control, or educating others about the dangers of a business model of education, these examples of organized, public resistance encourage others to reclaim a sense of urgency in fighting for public education. Contributors also describe the work of local and national organizations that have built coalitions for broader outreach and advocacy. Writers present a vi-

sion of ways we can act together toward progressive, multicultural, and democratic schools as we move into the future.

Even more voices of resilience and courage are found on the *Educational Courage* website. Coordinated with the book sections, pieces there offer powerful stories from others who fight for public education. In addition, the *Educational Courage* website contains practical materials related to the narratives in the book. Fact sheets from the National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest) and Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE), for example, provide excellent examples of materials that educate others. There are also resource lists of organizations and materials, a bibliography, and contributor biographies.

The pieces in *Educational Courage* are organized by theme rather than chronologically. The sequence builds from understanding school realities, to stories of individual resistance, to accounts of meaningful teaching despite top-down constraints, and finally to narratives of organized, collective resistance. A chronology of the creeping assault on public education from the passage of NCLB in 2002 to 2011—"A Short History of the Ambush of Public Education"—introduces part I. A snapshot of the movement to protest against these policies, provided next, gives context to the voices of the resisters whose stories you'll read in *Educational Courage*.

### A Decade of Educational Activism

Ever since the ambush of public education began, there have been educators, parents, and students who have spoken up to protest these hurtful policies. While market-driven initiatives began to threaten public education during the Reagan administration, they became solidly institutionalized in federal educational policy with the passage of NCLB. While people have spoken out to counter these policies over the past thirty years, this book focuses on the decade since 2002.

Well before NCLB, organizations and individuals were advocating for progressive, democratic education. Some like the North

Dakota Study Group focused on building democratic classrooms and schools and critiqued narrow methods of accountability and assessments. Others like the National Coalition of Educational Activists, a multiracial organization of parents, teachers, child advocates, union, and community activists, connected educational advocacy to broader struggles for social justice, equality, and democracy in order to improve public education.

Founded by Milwaukee teachers and parents in 1985, *Rethinking Schools* magazine became a voice not only for those doing meaningful social justice education in their schools, but for those resisting policies that undercut educational equity. *Rethinking Schools* continues to link classroom issues to policy concerns and chronicles the activism of teachers, parents, and students fighting for quality education for all children. Its superb books and curricula support educators working to enable students to achieve academically and act democratically.

In the late 1990s, more resisters sounded the alarm about the dangers of standardizing education. Susan Ohanian wrote the influential *One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards* in 1999 and has been writing about the dangers of testing and the privatization of public education ever since. In the same year, George N. Schmidt, a well-respected veteran teacher, was fired from his twenty-eight-year teaching job in Chicago when he published samples of the Chicago Academic Standards Examinations (CASE) in his journal *Substance*. He continues to critique the effects of harmful educational policies in *Substance News*. The National Center for Fair and Open Testing—FairTest—began its work to end the misuses and flaws of standardized testing and to ensure that evaluation of students, teachers, and schools is fair, open, valid, and educationally beneficial. FairTest continues to provide excellent information, technical assistance and advocacy on a broad range of testing concerns.

After the passage of NCLB, awareness of the problems with standardized testing and federal control over educational policy began

to grow. Parents, like those whose stories follow, fought the negative effects of testing on their children and schools all across the country throughout the decade. More recently, parent groups like Class Size Matters in New York City have fought overcrowding, corporate-connected charter schools, mayoral control, and the privatizing of education. In 2010, parent groups across the country joined together in Parents Across America in an effort to bring their voices into educational policymaking on national, as well as local and state levels.

Teachers have organized in their unions to fight for progressive educational policies. Some formed caucuses within large city unions, such as in Los Angeles, to resist corporate charter takeovers of schools and standardized testing. The Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) in Chicago won the 2010 election to lead the Chicago Teachers Union, and Bob Peterson, *Rethinking Schools* editor and advocate of social justice unionism, was elected president of the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association in 2011. Some groups like the Grassroots Education Movement (GEM) in New York City work both within and outside the larger teacher unions to educate and organize teachers, parents, students, and communities against corporate and government policies that underfund and privatize public schools. GEM produced the outstanding documentary, *The Inconvenient Truth behind Waiting for Superman* to further expose these policies.

Teachers have formed progressive organizations in various areas across the country to give each other encouragement, to share teaching strategies that support social justice, and to fight policies that undermine public education. These teacher activist groups across the country also typically hold annual conferences in various cities. In his piece in *Educational Courage*, contributor Sam Coleman describes the way the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE) supported his successful school-based effort to resist merit pay.

Throughout the past decade, numerous educators have written about the impending threat to public education. Among them are longtime democratic educator Deborah Meier and Diane Ravitch,

former assistant secretary of education, whose dialogue, "Bridging Differences," has been published in *Education Week* since 2007. Once an advocate of school choice, testing, and accountability, Ravitch published her influential *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* in 2010, arguing that these very policies are hurting students, teachers, and public education.

As the ambush of public education has become more intense, activism has increased. *Rethinking Schools* posted the "Not Waiting for Superman" website where critics responded to the myths underlying the corporate-supported film *Waiting for Superman* and generated ideas for local protests and actions that germinated across the country. When Governor Scott Walker tried to fast-track a bill to strip Wisconsin teachers and other public employees of their bargaining rights, Madison became a center of Wisconsin protest and national solidarity.

Civil rights groups have challenged the way market-driven educational policies harm students of color. In 2010, a coalition of groups, including the NAACP, the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, and Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, criticized Race to the Top legislation for emphasizing competitive incentives that leave the majority of low-income and students of color behind. It also critiqued the shutting down of low-performing schools, rather than doing more to close gaps in resources and to end racial segregation in schools. The coalition's report pressed for policy changes because "for too long communities of color have been testing grounds for unproven methods of educational change." In 2011, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and FairTest, among others, critiqued NCLB for catalyzing the school-to-prison pipeline. They documented how high-stakes testing and zero-tolerance policies have pushed students out of school into the juvenile and criminal justice systems, with especially severe effects on students of color and students with disabilities.

Students have also fought vigorously for their public schools. For example, students in Raza Studies Program in the Tucson High

Magnet School chained themselves to the empty chairs belonging to school board members to deter a vote that could close down their culturally relevant and academically successful program. In the spring of 2011, students at the Catherine Ferguson Academy in Detroit, a public school for pregnant students and young mothers, were handcuffed and arrested after sitting down in front of their very successful school to protest its imminent closure.

### **Moving Forward**

The future holds the hope of new directions in the fight for public education, including more national organizing, growing social justice unionism, and assertive public actions. Thousands of educators, parents, students, and administrators from across the country marched to keep public schools “public” at the Save Our Schools march in Washington, DC, in July 2011. Educators committed to principles of social justice unionism, such as those in Los Angeles and Milwaukee, are building coalitions with diverse communities to enlarge a base for awareness and activism. Young people and adults alike, making more bold public protests, are willing to risk arrest to call attention to the injustices that threaten public education. From the local to national level, from individual protests to collective civil disobedience, advocates of public education are developing creative approaches to educate and organize. Since social inequality and privatization also ambush the economy, housing, the health-care system, and the media, it will take a broad movement to foster the social change that is needed to revive democratic schooling in a democratic society.

Bolstered by the many examples in this volume and on the *Educational Courage* website, we hold out the hope that educators, students, and parents can *concurrently* forge strategies for surviving and thriving within the system *and* also use their individual and collective power to critique and challenge the many policies and practices that undermine public education today. The narratives here show that there’s no one way to resist and that courage, resilience, and organization are core values. We hope these accounts show the wide range of possibility for transforming “what is” into “what can be.”

Margaret Mead, in a famous quote, said, “Never doubt that a small group of concerned citizens can make a difference. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” We must begin with a shared conviction that change is possible; we must become informed and work together from a place of solidarity not only to resist but to sustain and create alternative spaces and visions for public education and a democratic society. This book is designed to help us on that journey.

## 6. Resisting the State Test: The Story of an Eleven-Year-Old, *Niño Rebelde*

*Francisco Guajardo*

In February 2005, my son Macario refused to take the Texas school test, the TAKS; he was in the fifth grade. The Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, or TAKS, is administered to public school students in the state and is the cornerstone of its accountability system. During the past generation, the TAKS has become the centerpiece of the school reform movement, and it has wreaked havoc on communities, schools, families, and countless children. My son responded to this havoc by refusing to take the test. His act of resistance catapulted him into the national spotlight, but it also challenged the education establishment in south Texas, and beyond, to pay closer attention to the increasing plight of children as they face conditions of undue stress in public schools.

The story really began in January 2004 when Macario developed a facial tic, an involuntary and incessant head jerk that he could not control. The head bobbing convinced my wife and me to take him to the family doctor. Upon examination, the doctor said Macario appeared fine, though he did seem a bit stressed. "What's going on at home?" the doctor asked.

"Things are normal at home," I said. "What about school? How are things there?" the doctor asked. Before I responded, Macario pronounced, "It's the TAKS! There's a lot of pressure at school to pass the TAKS!"

The doctor stated he had seen a number of other children who had come in because of stress symptoms, and he added that both children and parents admitted the source of the stress was the TAKS.

The doctor had no good answer for how to address Macario's stress, nor did he prescribe any medication. He only offered a blunt

criticism: "This testing business in the schools is crazy, and it's counterproductive."

About this same time, I received an invitation to deliver the opening address at a national conference of educators. During that school year, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was quickly descending upon the entire country, and because I was a Texas educator, conference organizers believed I could bring some Texas insight to the conference. The Texas brand of school reform, after all, was the blueprint upon which NCLB was based, and conference organizers were curious to hear about the effectiveness of Texas's school reform from the mouth of a Texas educator.

As I thought about my presentation, Macario was foremost on my mind, so I asked him for an interview. I explained my purpose and the nature of the conference, and told him that his voice would be more important than anything I could say about the school reform movement in Texas. He agreed to do it, so we drove to his elementary school, which we used as the backdrop for a video interview. I asked him to reflect on his experiences at school and to share some thoughts on the TAKS. I pinned a wireless microphone to his jacket and turned on the video camera. His comments were poignant and very revealing. I took the raw footage, edited a short video, and took Macario's voice with me to the North Dakota Study Group (NDSG) conference in Chicago.

The video was a big hit at the NDSG conference and sparked lively conversation. I received a number of requests for copies of Macario's interview, and subsequently sent copies to about a dozen people across the country. In California, educators used it as an organizing tool, as they held community meetings with parents who angrily contemplated how best to respond to the test-heavy NCLB policies. New York City educators used the video for similar purposes, though one creative elementary teacher showed the video to her third-grade students and asked them to write letters to Macario.

A packet from the Muscota New School arrived in my mailbox with those letters.



One child wrote, "Dear Macario, we are proud of you for speaking up against the test." Another said, "Dear Macario, did you have a hard time on the test cause sometimes I have a hard on it. Do you get it wrong or right? Do you hate test I hate it too."

And another said: "Dear Macario, I feel sorry for you that you have a test every week. But your [*sic*] not the only one, in my old school everyday [*sic*] we have a test."

Even the teacher, Louisa Cruz-Acosta, sent a letter. "I think you did a wonderful thing by making that video," she said. "My students would love to meet you." Additionally, Louisa sent Macario a copy of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Macario was already familiar with the story of Douglass, but the fact he received the book as a gift spurred new family conversations and, perhaps most importantly, gave Macario ideas about how one historical figure demonstrated acts of great courage during a time of deep personal and social distress.

The book and the letters transformed Macario. He gained a new realization of the power of his words and the power of his story, and he began to imagine that he could be even more courageous than simply voicing his views on video. Privately, he began to think about protesting the TAKS.

When the fourth-grade year ended, his facial tic went away within days, as he began to enjoy a summer of endless play and family time. But then fall arrived, and with it returned the stressful conditions of school. Within two weeks of the new school year, he became irritable and frustrated, and the facial tic returned. I picked him up from school one afternoon and noticed he was especially contemplative.

We arrived at our home, he said, "Daddy, sit down, I want to talk to you." Sit down? This must be important, I thought, because he rarely said that to me. He sounded very serious.

He then said, "I think I want to protest the TAKS test. I don't want to take it. I don't know how I would do that, but I don't want to take the TAKS." I asked him, "What do you mean you want to protest the TAKS? Do you know what that means? Do you know what you're saying?"

He responded, "No, not really. All I know is that I don't like the test and don't want to take it. I don't know how I would protest it, but I was thinking that I just wouldn't go to school on the day of the test. I think I need your help on this, Daddy."

I liked what I heard, because I had seen the pressure build in him and had seen him get physically sick from the anxiety of the test. As an educator myself, I understood the insanity of the testing culture in the public schools.

But there was a bigger family issue at work here, because my wife is also a teacher in the same school district where Macario was planning to protest.

I asked him, "You know your mother is a teacher in the district? And you know that this could be a really huge deal? But tell me, what's the real reason? Why do you really want to do this?"

"All I know," he said, "is that I don't like what the test does to my school. They've cut recess, they cut a lot of things that kids like to do, the fun stuff, and all they do is force us to study for the test. I just don't like what this test does to my school." With those words, Macario convinced me that I had to support him, and that I had to convince my wife to support him.

When my wife came home from school, I told her about Macario's plan. She reacted with great emotion. "Did you put him up to this?" she asked me. "No," I said. "It's entirely his idea."

My wife wasn't convinced, so she decided to question Macario. They sat together for just a few minutes, when Macario said to her, "Mommy, I don't like what the test does to my school." That's all she needed to hear. The words were simple, pure, and powerful. And that day Macario stopped bobbing his head. The facial tic would be gone forever.

From that day forward, Macario and I developed a strategy. We had several months before the administration of the TAKS the following February. We decided that first he would tell his classmates that he was about to protest the unfairness of the test. He was firm in his belief and wanted to take a stand. He made it clear to them that this was not an impulsive decision, nor was it a frivolous act. His

classmates responded positively, and some even said they'd join him on a protest march to the state capital.

Next, he talked to his teachers, and it turned out they were equally anxious to engage him in that conversation. One teacher even asked him to address the entire class, an experience he described with great enthusiasm. Next, we both explained his position to the school principal. Curiously, the principal told Macario she was proud of him for following his conviction, though she hoped he would still take the test.

During the second month of explanations, I visited both the assistant superintendent in charge of instruction and the superintendent. I explained that Macario's planned resistance was his honest way of saying that he'd had enough of the abusive test-prepping practices at his elementary school. I told them I was in complete support of Macario's position and suggested to them they should follow Macario's lead by keeping every child in the school district from taking the state-mandated test.

The school district administrators did not disagree with Macario's position; they actually told me they admired him, and believed his act of resistance was justified. They even felt compelled to share horrific stories about a number of children who were devastated by the intense pressure of the test.

"On the day of the test, Mr. Guajardo," said the assistant superintendent, "one child will bring her rosary to school, and she will rub the cross to the point where her hands will bleed. She's done that over the years, consistently on test days." "We have another child," said the superintendent, "who pulls her hair out, literally, because the pressure is too much on her."

Both senior administrators continued with the stories in a surreal display of good-hearted school leaders allowing horrific conditions to exist in their schools. I was heartbroken as I listened to the stories.

I asked the superintendent, "You allow this to happen?" "There's nothing I can do," he said. "It's the law." "Sir," I said to him, "you

would be a national hero if you demand that this madness stop. You would be a hero to people across the country if you simply decided no child in your school district would be subjected to such experiences!" "I wish I could," he said.

But he couldn't, of course, because in his mind, his employment depended on his ability to lead a school district toward good test results, even if the policies that dictate high-stakes testing engendered an oppressive school climate. "I agree with Macario," said the superintendent, "but my hands are tied."

The following week, Macario protested the state test. He spent the day of the test with his grandmother. They prepared several *salsas* of *chile*, had a good conversation, and posed for pictures for a *New York Times* reporter sent to south Texas to capture images of a child the *Times* called "a school exam's conscientious objector." Another news medium called him "*el niño rebelde*" (the rebel child).

Macario had not intended to be a *niño rebelde*; he had simply acted on his own sense of right and wrong, the way an honest eleven-year-old would, innocently, and without pretense. To Macario, Robert E. Lee Elementary was a test factory, and he believed the high-stakes testing environment created a type of school environment that was not good for him and not good for other kids either. His act of protest was an act of honest courage.

Days after the test, and after a time of frenzied media attention, Macario and I reflected on the meaning of his protest. He was proud of himself for acting on his own conviction and appreciated the positive reinforcement he received from family, friends, and even others in the school. He also expressed deep disappointment with the outcome, regretting he was the only student from his school, or from the entire south Texas region, to wage such a protest.

But Macario also saw how his act of resistance changed the behaviors of teachers and principals in his school. He had had an impact on how teachers taught, how principals led, and how the school district leadership thought about its TAKS preparation approach. Countless stories from teachers and school leaders described how

they altered their practices because of Macario's protest. In short, Macario's story is one of courage and possibility; it's one of an eleven-year-old child whose act of resistance forced a school and a community to change.

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