

The “Measures of Academic Progress” (MAP) Test in American High Schools

Victory for Seattle Teachers against High Stakes Education Testing

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On Monday, May 13, Seattle Schools Superintendent Jose Banda announced that “High schools may opt out of MAP [Measures of Academic Progress Test] in 2013-14.”

This announcement was greeted with spontaneous celebrations by teachers and students at Garfield High School where the boycott of MAP tests began in January.

Garfield High School’s librarian, Janet Woodward summed up the [meaning of the MAP test boycott](#) for Garfield saying,

“I feel vindicated by the decision to remove MAP testing from the high schools. Our movement has succeeded in exposing all of the fallacies of using this canned assessment. It is a waste of money and time, turns professionals into proctor clerks and produces results which are not statistically relevant.”

It was the first time a group of teachers have boycotted a standardized test in America. The boycott began on January 9, 2013 when the 19 strong group of teachers at Garfield High voted unanimously to refuse to administer the MAP test. The MAP test purports to evaluate student progress in reading and math in all grades (K-12). This is part of the growing national fight back against the high stakes testing regime that has swept through the US education system.

Garfield High teachers published a [letter](#) explaining the reasons for their boycott of the MAP test.

They point out how the MAP test disrupts students learning, is a costly and ineffective measure of student progress and is unfairly used to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers. Their letter concludes,

“We are not troublemakers nor do we want to impede the high functioning of our school. We are professionals who care deeply about our students and cannot continue to participate in a practice that harms our school and our students.”

The teachers’ successful boycott of the MAP tests was down to a variety of factors. The unswerving determination of teachers at Garfield and other Seattle schools to continue the test boycott in the face of threats of suspension from Superintendent Banda. The victory over the MAP test would not have been possible without the massive support from local

parents, many of whom refused to enter their kids for the MAP tests.

Another hugely important factor in this defeat of standardized testing was the solidarity action of hundreds of Seattle high schools students who held meetings and gave out flyers supporting the teacher test boycott. The independent decision of hundreds of students to refuse to sit the tests was critical to this victory over the MAP test. A break down of the winter MAP testing numbers at Garfield High revealed that only 180 valid tests were delivered out of a planned 810. Hundreds of students had taken solidarity action in support of their teachers by refusing to take the tests.

Besides this, the campaign has won huge support from teachers and trade unions across America. 60 leading academics, researchers and trade unionists signed a statement of support for the MAP test boycott.

The boycott of MAP test at Garfield High and other Seattle schools are part of the growing national movement against "high stakes" public school testing. In the past year hundreds of school boards across the country have passed resolutions calling for an end to high stakes testing of students stating that it is strangling learning. In New York a growing number of parents are refusing to let their children sit the standardized tests. The New York principals association has said that it no longer supports high stakes standardized testing. Many New York parents have criticised companies such as Pearson for profiteering from the increased testing of students.

Alongside this, is the growing movement against massive cuts to education funding. On 17 May thousands of [students in Philadelphia](#) walked out in protest at the planned cuts to education spending. Meanwhile, in Chicago on 22 May there was [three days of protests](#) against the mayor's plan to close 54 local schools.

Professor Diane Ravitch, who is a historian of education and former US assistant secretary of Education under President Bush signed a statement of support for the Seattle teachers along with 60 other leading education academics. She has recently commented, "We've had more than a decade of standardized testing and now we need to admit that it's not helping." In March 2010 in an [article](#) for the Wall Street Journal she explained why she was opposed to standardized testing:

"The current emphasis on accountability has created a punitive atmosphere in the schools. The Obama administration seems to think that schools will improve if we fire teachers and close schools. They do not recognize that schools are often the anchor of their communities, representing values, traditions and ideals that have persevered across decades. They also fail to recognize that the best predictor of low academic performance is poverty—not bad teachers."

Professor Mark Naison of Fordham University says the negative effects of testing disproportionately impacts low income students. Professor Wayne Au of Washington University supported the Seattle teachers boycott of MAP tests and has commented, "The emerging consensus among [academic] researchers is clear: high stakes standardized tests are highly problematic to say the least."

The Chicago Teachers' Union has launched a campaign called [Pencils Down](#) to support both

local and national efforts to eliminate high stakes standardized tests from public schools. In a paper called Debunking the myths of Standardized Testing it [comments](#):

"Children who do not have access to health care, who are hungry, who do not have books or access to other informal learning at home, whose parents have limited education, whose families are constantly stressed by economic problems, and who do not go to libraries and museums in their free time are at and academic disadvantage.

These factors are highly related not only to testing outcomes, academic achievement, future education and socio-economic success, but also to the racial, ethnic and class origins of individuals."

Education writer [Alfie Kohn has noted](#) how politicians and the education establishment express "outrage" at low academic achievement amongst low-income and other disadvantaged children. They believe in quick fixes such as blaming teachers for low educational attainment:

"Many public officials, along with like-minded journalists and other observers, are apt to minimize the matter of resources and assume that everything deficient about education for poor and minority children can be remedied by more forceful demands that we 'raise the bar.' The implication here would seem to be that teachers and students could be doing a better job but have, for some reason, chosen not to do so and need only be bribed or threatened into improvement...The focus among policy has been on standards of outcomes rather than standards of opportunity,"

High stakes standardized testing are a major part of President Obama's education programme [Race To The Top](#). This gives city and state authorities the power to take punitive action against schools and individual teachers for poor student performance in standardized tests. It is worth noting that most private schools, where President Obama and other public officials send their kids, refuse to administer standardized tests. They want their students to have access to critical thinking skills and creativity not rote learning.

Garfield history teacher and union rep Jesse Hagopian has commented upon the significance of their victory in an interview with [Democracy Now TV](#) on 20 May:

"It's a real crisis for for these corporate education reformers ...because their whole system of education reform rests on these data points, on reducing teaching and learning to a single score that they can use to close schools like your seeing proposed in Chicago and Philadelphia. That they can use these data points to degrade education and profit from it turning them into charter [schools]."

Jesse Hagopian went on to note the importance of the Seattle teacher's victory against inappropriate forms of school testing:

"This boycott represented a threat to their ability to reduce teaching and learning to a single score. I think that's why Michelle Ree and these corporate reformers are so upset we stood up to their tests and refused to give them. I think that's why so many teachers, parents and students across the nation are

celebrating this victory.”

Garfield High teacher Mallory Clarke said their victory will have positive consequences for the future, “I think the Seattle Schools’ final position on the MAP this year is evidence of the power of teachers. We carved out a bit of time from our overwhelming responsibilities to take on some of the worst features of so-called education reform, and we moved mountains. Getting free of the MAP at the high school level gives us an opening to pursue useful assessment.”

During the test boycott over 20 teachers from around Seattle met to develop an alternative to the MAP test called [Teacher Work Group on Assessment Recommendations, Spring 2013](#). Superintendent Banda’s decision to allow schools to opt out of the MAP test was made on the provision that schools will need to develop their own assessments in 2014 to replace the MAP test. The teacher working group recommendations should provide the guidelines to do that.

This is all in sharp contrast with Finland which is universally recognised as having one of the best education systems in the world. In Finland education is free at all levels. There is no national testing of learning outcomes. Students only take one standardized test when they are sixteen. Teachers are well paid highly respected individuals and are not penalised by a payment by results regime. There is an emphasis upon social equality sadly lacking in America with its mania for privatization of public services that benefits big companies looking to make quick profits.

The victory of teacher’s in Seattle against high stakes testing should inspire teacher’s, parents and students that a fight back against the big business agenda in education is possible. As Garfield Special Education teacher [Serena Samar said](#), “Our actions as a staff have reignited the belief that a group of people can make a difference.”

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