

Testing times

Global trends in marketisation of public education through accountability testing



NSW Teachers Federation
Eric Pearson Study Report

Dianne Butland

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Cover photo of a classroom in an allegedly 'failing school' in Boston, USA.

Foreword

Eric Pearson was President of the NSW Teachers Federation from 1974 to 1975. He was also President of the Australian Teachers Federation. He commenced his teaching career in small country schools as a two year trained teacher prior to active service in New Guinea and Borneo during World War 2. He subsequently returned to teaching and further study, and received a PHD from London University. He had a distinguished teaching and lecturing career, and was head of the department of education at Sydney Teachers College. He died on June 8, 1977.

Originally called the Eric Pearson Memorial Travel Grant, the Eric Pearson Study Grant was established as a fitting tribute to his outstanding contribution as a scholar and unionist.

The first award was made in 1980 to Gus Plater, a teacher and activist from Armidale Teachers Association who investigated the social impact of micro-processor technology and its impact on schools and unions.

Areas of investigation since then have covered the range of issues affecting teachers and the role of the union. Examples include the study by Jim Gallagher (1981) of teacher education programs to meet the need of indigenous people in Canada and the United States. Ross Rinehart (1983) examined methods of control of teacher stress in the United States and Canada. Richard Walsham (1984) studied peace education in Europe. Sally Edsall (1986) tackled the role of teacher-librarians and function of school libraries in the United States. Phil O'Neill (1987) looked at the privatisation of public education in western Europe.

Gary Rogers (1988) covered rural education issues in the United States. Viv White (1993) considered the restructuring of education and its implications for teachers' work. Patricia Simpson (1994) looked at devolution, schools and collective bargaining. Mary Fogarty (1995) studied the impact of the national curriculum, assessment and testing on teachers' work in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. Frank Barnes (1997) surveyed issues affecting lesbian, gay and bisexual teachers and students in western Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States. John Dixon (1998) studied how technology could enhance union campaigning and Gary Zadkovich (1999) developed strategies for union organising. In 2004 we published *Redefining Activism: Gender Perspectives in Union Participation* by Sui-Linn White, in 2005, *Staffing an empty schoolhouse: attracting and retaining teachers in rural, remote and isolated communities* by Phil Roberts, in 2006 *The impact of on-going professional training and development for teachers of students with disabilities* by Vivienne Harling and in 2007 *Comparative study of TAFE NSW teachers and further education lecturers in the United Kingdom, in relation to continuing professional development* by Kerry Barlow.

The investigations arising from the Eric Pearson Study Grant have contributed significantly to the work and ongoing development of the NSW Teachers Federation.

John Irving
General Secretary

Introduction

Where to with national testing?

The first round of the Australian National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) took place in the week of the May 12–16, 2008, with students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in all schools across Australia participating. NAPLAN represented a rapid implementation of the policy announced in 2006 by the former Liberal government. This policy was endorsed by the Labor Party as part of the 2007 federal election campaign and subsequently implemented by the Rudd Labor Government.

In 2008, all students in each of these school years have been subjected to hastily developed standardised tests, which are educationally problematic. Globally, standardised tests in education have become high stakes. Standardised tests perform an accountability function of serving the neo-liberal aim of shrinking the allocation from the public purse to education whilst consolidating centralised control of curriculum and pedagogy.

NAPLAN's literacy testing included:

- reading
- writing
- language conventions (which comprise spelling, grammar and punctuation).

NAPLAN's numeracy testing included:

- number
- algebra, function and pattern
- space and measurement, chance and data.

A reading early in 2008 of the NAPLAN website presented sample questions that did little to build confidence in the testing process as a valid process for enhancing education for school children across Australia.

The introduction of standardised testing as a key accountability instrument by the Australian government provides the context for this study. The oppor-

tunity to meet with unionists, educators and parent/community groups, principally in the United Kingdom and the United States of America (USA), provided the opportunity to see on the ground the effects of well established international trends in government educational policies. Federation's Eric Pearson Study Grant supported the project financially.

The emphasis on large scale testing and standards to provide the accountability data for the administration of education systems is a global theme in policy and practice. These processes are presented as a way to generate greater economic efficiency in the administration of education.

As governments seek to expand the market economy into education, efficient business practices require the establishment of cost effective, although narrow and simplistic, accountability mechanisms. Standardised testing becomes the accountability mechanism that governments use to demonstrate 'value-added' in the provision of public education. The language of 'rigour', 'standards' and 'targets' has displaced the discourse by which the community once engaged with schools.

Scores on literacy and numeracy tests have become the indicators and evidence of, apparently successful schooling. Debate over the philosophy of education and the nature and value of authentic curriculum as the means of engaging students has given way to the demands of centralised lock-step curriculum and accountability systems. The values of a rich, authentic student-centred curriculum, as well as the notion that education ought to be about the creation of a citizenry able to contribute to a more equal, just and a democratic society, have been discarded.

Education public policy

Current trends in education undoubtedly have much to do with long-run changes in our ideas and social processes, the nature of which we can only dimly perceive... We cannot afford the unthinking copying from elsewhere of education policies dimly understood. Nor can we afford a situation in which many jurisdictions are doing similar things while failing to learn from each other. (Levin, 1998)

It is essential for Australian educators to get a better understanding of the impact of these new accountability mechanisms on the funding, status and quality of public education in countries around the world. There is a moral and political necessity to preserve the prime place and purpose of public schools to maintain and foster a more egalitarian democratic society.

This report endeavours to bring into focus the nature and impact of the new "accountability" processes upon education in the USA and England which reflects the growth of managerialism in public policy. Reference

is also made to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and its exemplar, Finland.

The neo-liberal political attacks on public education have common characteristics, though the intensity of the threat varies from nation to nation. In the USA and England the crisis is significant. Australia has the time to avoid the major disasters of these governments' policies.

When there is a push for standards, accountability, and regulation of schools, teachers, and students, there is also an explicit linkage of corporate interests with educational practices. The linked rhetoric of efficiency and performance standards, and the redefinition of education to serve the labour market, has become the common vocabulary of educational policies across the USA. (Lipman, 2004)

What we do to shield the public institutions which form the foundations of our democratic society will depend on the lessons learnt from the mistakes elsewhere and the foresight provided by citizens in the initiatives and responses to government policy.

unproblematic to fit the students, a broader more challenging and culturally enriched curriculum can be provided.

•The ability of teachers and principals to respond to the curriculum and pedagogical needs of their students has been supplanted by the imposition of national testing in England and in the USA by federally moderated nationally prescribed standards. The failure of local schools and students to meet national standards is seen not as an indictment of national standards and the testing process, but as proof that

local teachers and schools are not competent.

•Government funded charter schools in the USA, called Academies in England are selective. Undesirable, poor and/or low achieving students are excluded because these schools are able to choose which students will enhance their performance on school league tables and their market place profile. Independent schools do not have to participate in government accountability. It is assumed that the market place provides the accountability to parents of the students at these schools.

Public education reformed by neo-liberal ideology

Education systems in England and the USA have been subject to the impact of New Right governments. Neo-liberal reforms of education, driven by the objective to reduce the role of the state as a provider of education and to assert the primacy of market forces in the provision of education, have produced the following outcomes:

•One of the most inequitable attacks on public education in the USA has been the growing degree of inequality between schools in rich and poor communities; this is despite the existence of both state and federal equalisation formulas. The funds given are insufficient to meet the minimal needs of schools serving poor communities. By contrast, wealthy communities can provide additional funding to enhance both the breadth and depth of education provided in their schools. These funding differences create disparities in student life chances.

•Despite a positive espousal of a desire for equality of outcome, and the affirmation of parental choice,

in most states of the USA and England access to public education is limited by where the parents live and their income.

•In England and the USA, national testing requirements have imposed a level of fiscal and curriculum control over schools. Compliance with centrally imposed standards has forcefully aligned teaching and learning to tightly defined, centrally delineated, uniform curriculum specifications. Funding is allocated in accordance with compliance to the achievement of specified improvement in standards.

•The effective segregation of students by socio-economic status, ethnicity and religion has been heightened by the current national testing regime and its associated funding provisions. The greater effort required in economically and socially disadvantage communities, to demonstrate minimum standards through the tests, means that the opportunity for broader educational activities is diminished. In contrast, in wealthier communities where the tests are

The USA experience: Many more children left behind

Background

Since the 1950s and Sputnik, the perceived failure of the US education systems to ensure the competitive position of American science and technology in the face of the successful Soviet space program has had ongoing economic and political consequences. For education the result has been legitimating of federal government intervention in education to achieve ideological goals.

The War on Poverty initiative led to the 1965 Elementary and Secondary School Act, which recognised the special needs of low income families. Title 1 (of the 1965 Act) introduced federal finances to support local education agencies to compensate for the educational disadvantages of the most deprived communities. This was the beginning of Head Start and other intervention programs such as *Sesame*

Street. At this time, federal intervention in education had a strong orientation to redressing the inequalities in American society.

The nature of federal education intervention changed with the release of the Regan administration's *A Nation at Risk* (Report of the National Commission, 1983). The report argued that student achievement was declining. All states were required to introduce standardised testing to measure student performance at key transition points in schooling. Schools were seen to be accountable for the failure of their students. A notion of performance pay for teachers was introduced and subsequently school performance data was made available to parents to inform school choice. Educational enrolments were therefore thrust into the market place.

No Child Left Behind

George Bush's 2001 legislation, No Child Left Behind "crystallises key neo-liberal, neo-conservative, and business-oriented education policies" (Lipman, P, 2004) and accelerates the impact of intensified accountability requirements. The main components of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) are mandatory high-stakes testing used to evaluate schools, teachers and students' performance; and vouchers and other supports for privatising schools.

Educational tests are set by each individual state but are federally moderated. Schools must ensure students achieve "adequate yearly progress" so that by 2014 all students will be performing to accepted academic standards.

The tests are predicated on neo-liberal arguments that schools and teachers, if not held strictly accountable, will waste public monies on non-quantifiable activities in the classroom. The impact of standardised tests on every aspect of school life, as schools

are compelled to improve students' test scores and protect the position of the school on league tables, has lessons for those not fully down this pathway.

To hold schools accountable, all student assessment results must be publicly reported. These results are disaggregated by ethnicity, disability, gender, English language proficiency and socio-economic status. Each of these groups is required to show "adequate yearly progress" or the school is seen to be "failing".

Schools are additionally required to report the school's results to parents in a way that permits comparison with other schools. Parents whose children attend low-income schools that fail to make "adequate yearly progress" over a year are given the opportunity to transfer their child to another school or obtain additional tutoring funded by the school.

The No Child Left Behind legislation had bipartisan support when proposed. The rhetoric of the legislation suggested real attempts to address the inequalities in

public education. The legislation reflected community impatience with the failure of some states and school districts to address the needs of 'disadvantaged' children. However, because the remedies NCLB imposes are ultimately driven by the instrument of the standardised test, the remedies have expanded the inequalities in public education. (Meier et al, 2004)

No Child Left Behind: the inequitable realities

No Child Left Behind has amplified problems that were already deeply entrenched in the USA education systems. Fundamentally, No Child Left Behind undermines equality in public education, punishing rather than supporting the poor and disadvantaged minority groups. The testing process involves both decisions made about what the collected data says, and decisions about what to do in response to the data. These decisions impact significantly upon teachers' work and the lives of students.

As a central part of its platform the No Child Left Behind legislation dictates the use of accountability mechanisms directed at the enforcement of a constant decrease in the achievement gaps, for example, between rich and poor, black and white and Hispanic and Anglo students. The disaggregation of results of disadvantaged groups of students was supposed to bring about an increase in equity.

No Child Left Behind has not brought about an improvement: race and class difference in educational outcomes have increased as American schools have become re-segregated (Boger and Orfield ed, 2003). The segregation of schools has become a problem more entrenched than prior to the USA Supreme Court judgment *Brown v Board of Education* (1954) which outlawed segregation in American schools and attempted to enforce de-segregation resulting in the bussing of students.

This question of whether test driven accountability has brought about greater equity was specifically addressed in the study of Texas schools conducted by McNeil (2000). Her study reports on the way in which classroom practices have been distorted by bureaucratic and centralised controls. To demonstrate improvement in test scores, the content of the school curriculum has been shaped by the scope of the assessment tool. The consequence has been a de-skilling of teachers, who are forced to choose between providing a meaningful education and meeting the demands for rising test scores. McNeil concludes that classrooms are less focused on serving the needs of the most disempowered.

McNeil "demonstrates that standardization widens educational inequalities and masks historical and persistent inequalities. Standardization shifts both the control of schools and the official language of educational policy into a technical mode intended to divorce the public from the governance of public school".

In this age of standardised testing, "closing the gap" is the rhetoric by which the USA government has legitimated the changes in educational policy. The gap in performance between rich and poor, black and white, and so on is to be closed by making "adequate yearly progress". But the progress is narrowly defined in terms of the tests.

Standardised tests provide data about student performance on the tests and nothing more. At best the tests provide information to assess students' mastery of the test. They tell nothing about students' understandings and certainly cannot measure school or teacher effort.

The research demonstrating inequitable outcomes for schools and for particular groups of students has a long and extensive history. The solution to the problem does not rest in the school. Overcoming inequality requires complex responses by government to the deep and growing inequalities inherent in society.

Under No Child Left Behind resources are directed away from where they are most needed. Black, Hispanic and poor white children are the ones who are at risk of failing to achieve "adequate yearly progress". Not making "adequate yearly progress" results in resources being directed away from 'failing schools' with the result that the ability of the school to employ trained and experienced teachers is further depleted and the curriculum is narrowed to concentrate on basic numeracy and literacy.

As schools endeavour to achieve progress targets and so maintain funding, strong incentive can operate to push away low achieving students who are most in need of support. The reward and punishments that accompany the progress targets have changed the nature of schooling so that student alienation and disengagement is increasing. Teachers struggle to balance the demands of remaining employed and keeping their school open while trying to avoid the individual needs of students being marginalised.

The linking of curriculum to tests narrows and trivialises what can be taught. The pressures of accountability testing leads to the distortion of teaching and learning most commonly in schools attended by the poor and marginalised children. Children who attend schools in wealthy areas do not experience the same degree of distortion of their education.

Public education under attack in England: land of test and Tory

If efficiency means the demoralization of the school system; dollars saved and human materials squandered; discontent, drudgery and disillusion — We'll have none of it! If efficiency denotes low finance, bickering and neglect; exploitation, suspicion and inhumanity; larger classes, smaller pay and diminished joy—We'll have none of it! We'll espouse and exalt humane efficiency-efficiency that spells felicity, loyalty, participation, and right conduct. Give us honourable efficiency and we shall rally to the civic cause. (Callahan, 1962 in Welch, 1998)

The accountability regime in England has entrenched an array of standardised tests and exams that feed a system of league tables that are used to reshape education. Democratic notions of education are displaced by a pedagogic production line which generates statistical results for those who claim that efficiency and effectiveness are somehow insured by the constant testing of students.

Student learning, other than for the clearly defined and narrow requirements of the next test, may well have become irrelevant and may well be considered to be inefficient and a waste of public resources.

Failure to comply with the educational production line of atomised knowledge, as delineated by the national test curriculum, means that a classroom teacher's professional competence will be questioned. Collective learning has become replaced by 'survival of the fittest' as endless competitive assessment becomes the *raison d'être* for any classroom activity.

Pupils feel largely powerless in a system that assesses them, labels them, tells them the 'appropriate' subjects to study and dictates the level of examination that is in their best interests. Teachers feel caught within the conflicting demands of their pupils, their subject specialism, their senior managers and their own desire as profes-

sionals with particular ideological and personal agendas. (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000)

Schools that do not achieve at the required level of performance are labelled as a 'failed school' and lose students, funding, and face potential closure.

For students, their educational experience has become one where the equivalent of a whole year of their K-12 schooling is spent sitting for exams. Politicians require that the system demonstrates improved tests scores. Whether students actually understand what has been taught to them is irrelevant. What is important is the individual's contribution to the statistical whole that is used to market the school and ultimately the system.

These educational policies were developed and implemented by the Conservatives but subsequently strengthened under New Labour. The rhetoric was one of raising school standards, providing more information to parents and enhancing parental choice. But the reality is overwhelming authoritarianism and pressure to conform to the demands of centralised authorities who have the power to control funding.

In England since 1996 the Standards Achievement Tests (SATs) have been compulsory at the ages of 7 (key stage 1), 11 (key stage 2) and 14 (key stage 3). Together with the age 16 General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), these form the base for the government's accountability system. In 2004, following intense public outcry, the external testing for 7 year olds was abolished. The agreement was that teacher assessments for 7 year olds would take place throughout the year.

Individual student's performance, as measured by the tests, is compared against national standards. All school test results are required to be reported and standards are expected to increase over time. This data is used for government accountability purposes. Poor or inadequate school performance on the tests may lead to school closure and/or removal of the principal. Local Education Authorities may subsequently rebrand and privatise a 'failed' school as an Academy.

In their book *Rationing Education*, Gillborn and Youdell document the impact of widely published league tables on secondary schools in England. The league tables are constructed from the results allocated to students from the tests associated with the GCSE in year 10. Student results are reported against performance bands A-E. The accumulated scores of students in each school are used to construct league tables. The hierarchical ranking of schools is obtained

from the number of students receiving an A-C in at least five of their subjects. This "A-C economy" forms the basis of a highly centralised, authoritarian education system which has reshaped compulsory schooling. Students and teachers experience competition and unprecedented surveillance.

The impact on teachers' work and children's learning reveals that the national tests have had a deep reaching effect on what happens in classrooms in England.

Narrowing of the curriculum

National testing takes place in Mathematics, English language and Science and thus these core subjects enjoy greater status than other areas of the curriculum. Classroom learning is skewed by the emphasis on the tested subjects as teachers are forced to demonstrate improved standards. Teaching to the tests by test preparation and practice tests is a consequence of the climate of fear of failure. Reports have been given of schools spending 10 hours a week for three to four months prior to the tests in test preparation (Mansell, 2007). Course content, subject standards criteria and assessment objectives have become prescribed by the tests, significantly narrowing the curriculum.

When the probability of success for an individual is low and failure would pull down the all important school performance, a student may be pushed into a vocational or similar course where that student's performance is likely to maintain the school's statistics of performance. The educational needs and interests of students are often marginalised to the statistical requirements necessary for the school's "success".

Primary school subjects not examined receive little attention. The 2003/04 report by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the government's monitoring body, noted that because most schools were focusing on testing, the curriculum in years 2 and 6 in many schools has been reduced in breadth and depth. Subjects such as Physical Education, Music and Art, which for some make coming to school

worthwhile, have all but disappeared. (Mansell)

Within those subjects that are examined, the content is narrowed. For example, in English little attention is paid to speaking and listening skills. Sustained anxiety about the testing process means that drama in English and enquiry and practical experiments in Science are neglected. (Reed and Hallgarten, 2003)

As an example of time constraints, and the need to cover the tested curriculum, the suggestion was made that if all the questions on the compulsory Shakespeare play came from Act I and Act II, no class would waste time reading through the rest of the play in class just to see what happens. All that would be taught are the prescribed extracts to be tested and the examiners' requirements for a successful answer. (Mansell)

As students work through past papers, are taught 'model answers' and memorise the examiners' requirements, meaningful learning has ceased. This particularly occurs in schools serving low socio-economic communities so that the school's overall performance is ensured. Students, not surprisingly, are bored and alienated by these experiences. (Mansell)

Learning in many English schools has ceased to be a cooperative activity where students and teachers ask questions and explore possible answers. Instead, school learning is frequently about short term cramming to fulfil short term objectives which are then statistically analysed.

Performance pay and teacher welfare

Key stage literacy and numeracy tests and end of school exam results are used to determine performance related pay for head teachers, principals, and more recently for classroom teachers. Annual appraisals of educators (for the determination of incre-

mental payments) use pupil progress, determined by an increase in standards in the national tests, as one of the two indicators of teacher effectiveness. The inevitable consequence of these arrangements is that teachers are forced to adjust their teaching

to the demands of the system to the exclusion of students' education.

Low morale and resignations increase as the ideals of teaching are devalued. Teaching is no longer seen to be a creative and professional career. Teachers are 'ground down' and pushed to teach to the tests. Teachers' work has become 'routinised' like that of workers on a production line. The curriculum is divided into fragmented tasks to produce standard learning outcomes.

The status of teaching, important for the recruitment of new teachers, is an issue in England. Teachers are the subject of persistent media headlines about 'failing schools' and 'failing teachers'. This contrasts with Finland, where teachers are highly educated and trusted professionals. In England, graduates are not attracted to teaching because teachers are not trusted by authorities and teachers' work is boring and does not respond to the needs of children.

Further evidence of the decline in teacher satis-

faction with their work is to be found in an interim report arising from the current Primary Education Review in England. This report notes that of more than 130 research studies, many described the de-skilling of primary teachers. Primary teachers felt undermined and demoralised by the national curriculum and the national literacy and numeracy strategies. The purpose of schooling has become pupil performance on the tests. (Bloom)

A survey of teachers carried out for the National Union of Teachers found that a massive 91 per cent of those responding said the tests placed additional workload on teachers and 93.1 per cent of primary and 85 per cent of secondary teachers said they were stressful for pupils. Some 90 per cent of teachers felt the tests diminished pupils' access to a broad and balanced curriculum. (Reagan in Hill)

Student welfare — children don't matter

The current accountability regime is harmful as it renders the learning experience more superficial, more mechanistic and more repetitive for pupils. Students are not better educated, but schools have become more adept at the exam game with its predictable tests. (Mansell)

Children are no longer the active participants in their education. It is the statistical compilation of their grades that matters and every little bit counts! Strict uniformity and compliance with the externally set and exacting standards, has suppressed the quest of knowledge and even the joy of coming to school.

The reports of increased homework, and the expansion of private coaching programs, are attributable to the pressure on parents and teachers to produce results. Sports programs and cultural activities are neglected both in and out of schools.

Student scores have become a marketable commodity, as school choice is sold to parents anxious to ensure perceived advantages for their child.

Schools favour those students who are considered to be able to reach the targeted test scores. These will be provided with the necessary additional resources and teaching assistance at the expense of the low achieving students. Those students who are seen to have some potential are shunted into highly struc-

tured courses that are designed to guarantee a pass mark. The demand associated with meeting the targets means that a focus on the lowest achievers is discouraged. It is the mark that matters: neither the scope nor content of any learning that accompanies the mark is of any significance.

The pastoral system in many schools becomes narrowly focused on that group of students who are expected to be able to make the transition to satisfactory achievement. (Gillborn and Youdell) Streaming becomes the organisational necessity of the school.

This focus on finding the students whose test results can be improved leads inevitably to the labelling of those at the bottom as lacking "ability". Tests for accountability purposes rarely gauge student understanding; such tests are too generalised and standardised to provide meaningful diagnosis of individual students. Yet judgements are made about students' 'ability' on the basis of these tests. The consequence for students is that the test becomes the definer of 'innate ability' and determiner of educational outcomes.

The inequalities that arise from the competition to demonstrate high performance on the league tables are disguised by the apparently individualised approach. Test performance is intensely related to social class and

other cultural factors. The influence of socio-economic factors and ethnicity intertwine in their influence on students' educational outcomes. But these factors are ignored by the system as the individual becomes the focus of test taking curriculum.

The achievement gap between students of different socio-economic backgrounds has not been closed. The achievement gap is increasing as the practices associated with selection and streaming are invigorated and

Education Action Zones and private know how

Education Action Zones were set up in areas of low socio-economic status by then Prime Minister Tony Blair. This policy had as its object the improvement of standards of education at each of the participating schools. The central purpose of the initiative, however, was to break down the public/private interface, thereby legitimising the involvement of private enterprise in the public education system. The Education Action Zones brought together schools, including primary and secondary schools, working with a private sponsor to develop educational programs that were designed to address problems relating especially to the level of engagement of pupils with the curriculum. (Reagan in Hill)

The Education Action Zones established the ground for private partnerships in public schooling. So too has the 2005 initiative of establishing Academies.

Anyone wishing to become a sponsor of an Academy had only to make a contribution of £2 million and the Government would provide the rest of the money necessary to fund a building where a new building was

Rising test scores

Because of the central government demand that schools and local education areas show improvements in student standards on test performance before they receive additional national funding, it is not surprising that the number of students receiving higher grades increases. Money is a strong motivator. However, rising test scores does not indicate that students are better educated. Essentially, the currency in test scores has been inflated, as students

those at the bottom are seen to be unable to learn.

A parent who said "SATs only benefit estate agents" reflected the phenomena that proximity to a school that achieves well in the league tables enhances property values. In a climate where competition is forced on schools, few schools would object. Not only is this effective advertising for the school but higher property values bring in more 'high achieving' students to further enhance the school's results and their place in the league table.

deemed necessary and to pay for all the running costs. (Reagan in Hill)

The schools are handed over to the sponsors to manage according to their business expertise. The scheme has met strong resistance and although some individuals have received peerages as a reward for their sponsorship, the actual contribution of private money has been small, and these schools are mostly funded publicly. Despite public funding, the sponsors have maintained the control and management of these schools, placing them essentially outside public regulation.

The Academies have been introduced as a by-product of 'failing schools', offered as a solution to communities whose schools have been depleted of students and resources as a result of league table-induced competition. The Academies have failed in terms of the government's own criteria. On the basis of the reports of Ofsted Inspectors pupil achievement has not improved. The Anti Academies Alliance leads opposition to these schools, slowing their spread and challenging the legislative base on which they are founded.

are better at demonstrating higher standards because that is what they are now taught to do. The extreme narrowness of the 'standards' against which students are measured contributes to the evidence that high stakes testing does not drive up standards.

The existence of three competing curriculum providers that provide courses and tests that are marketed to schools on the claim that they will raise or ensure schools maintain their standards has a direct effect on the outcomes achieved.

United Kingdom no longer united

Today England stands significantly apart from the rest of the United Kingdom. Scotland and Wales have progressively abolished the testing which they had initially participated in.

Scotland no longer has the highly structured centralised curriculum of England. Testing was seriously challenged in Scotland, with the result that in 2003, the Scottish parliament abolished the 5–14 national tests as used in England. The tests were replaced with ‘pupil-focused assessment’. Up until the second year of secondary school, any tests are administered and assessed by teachers rather than being externally marked as is in England. League tables do not exist.

The Scottish focus is on ‘pupil-centred assessment’. Teachers use marking and evaluation to inform the teaching learning process which then enables students to become more actively engaged, rather than the passive recipients, or active resisters, of the curriculum. It is reported (Hallam et al, 2003) that more active participation has increased pupils’ enthusiasm for learning, resulting in an improved classroom climate. Students’ behaviour has correspondingly improved and teachers experience a reduced need for coercive discipline. Increased motivation of pupils means teachers too have found their teaching more rewarding. Students benefit in complex ways from the positive impact of teachers’ increased motivation, enthusiasm and commitment.

The devolution of a separate education system in Wales in 2001 was accompanied by the abolition of the testing of 7 year old pupils (stage 1) as a clear rejection of the English test-dominated system. Testing of 11 year old pupils (the notorious sorter and sifter of ‘intellectual ability’ that has plagued British education and ensured the class divide in education) was subsequently abolished in Wales.

2008 brings the end of testing of 14 year olds in Wales. These tests are replaced by teacher assessment and reporting around agreed standards. This

reporting does not lead to the easy construction of league tables. The impact of testing on students’ learning was clearly acknowledged as a concern by Welsh educators.

In England, despite the arguments and protests of researchers, teachers and parents over the bombardment of children with tests, it is now, at the primary level, that serious questioning of these processes by government is beginning to occur.

The release in November 2007 of an interim report, which forms part of the Primary Review of Education in England, clearly argues that SAT tests are an unreliable measure of standards. The report observes that SAT tests have encouraged schools to neglect lower achievers and narrow the curriculum. Director of the review, Robin Alexander, describes the worrying evidence of test induced stress in primary school students. This report calls for a focus on ‘assessment for learning’, and a separation of assessment of individual pupils from mechanisms for school accountability. (Alexander, 2007)

In April 2008 the National Association of Head Teachers voted to campaign in opposition to the release of test data used for the construction of league tables. The Association has called for parents to keep their children at home during test week. Furthermore, the union will endeavour to work with the other teacher unions including the National Union of Teachers to have a boycott on the submission of test results from their schools so that performance tables cannot be constructed.

Gordon Brown...and his ministers must take account of what teachers and education academics are saying or we will never catch up with the Scandinavian systems that he so admires and which do not have high stakes testing. (*Times Education Supplement*, November 2007)

High stakes testing and educational markets

The academic supporters of the philosophy of marketisation and choice in schooling, Chubb and Moe in *Politics and Markets and American Schools* (1990), blamed the ‘failure’ of urban schools on centralised educational administration. They argued that centralised administration creates inflexible structures. Their alternative, market structures, requires “...particular policies for evaluation, financing, assessment, standards, teacher training, curriculum, instruction and testing”. These policies “...seek to reduce state sponsorship and financing and to impose management and efficiency ideas borrowed from the business sector as a framework for educational decision making”. (Burbules and Torres, 2000)

These market mechanisms supposedly enhance the process of individual parental choice, but in reality, displace democratic notions of schooling: the common good, equity and the collective empowerment of the citizenry.

High stakes testing with its emphasis on winners and losers is the mechanism for the creation of competition between schools. ‘Successful’ schools attract students because of their perceived standing in the market place. Test data has been used to create league tables. League tables have ostensibly provided information to support ‘school choice’. In reality the tables increase competition which causes the educational market to operate in a manner that increases differentiation between various groups.

League tables are legitimated as a way of helping

parents to choose the school for their child. Parents whose children are seen to be desirable in terms of what a school needs to enhance the school’s position on the league table are empowered to make choices about the school for their child. The ultimate choice resides with the school. The marketisation of schooling has entrenched the class, gender and ethnic division between schools in both the USA and in England. These divisions shape the nature of the education and reinforce the inequalities of society.

Today inner city schools in the USA and England are the ones that are diverse in ethnicity, religion and language, but largely the domain of the poorest communities. Diversity of school population has become closely associated with the problem of ‘failing’ schools. Those schools which are homogeneous are seen to be ‘problem free’ and ‘successful’. Problem free schools are far less bureaucratised, well resourced by their wealthier communities and are able to offer a challenging curriculum because they do not struggle to achieve the minimum standards set by the tests.

According to market theory, the problems of poverty, class and ethnicity that characterise the populations of some American schools are a school problem rather than a problem of an undemocratic and unequal society. Inequity and powerlessness in society and in education need to be addressed through comprehensive community and school development programs that are designed to address the basic problems that divide our society.

The illusion of choice

School choice has come to dominate the political ideology of the United Kingdom, the USA and Australia. Choice and competition characterise the market mechanism central to the policy debates on how to improve educational standards. Choice is dependent on the creation of apparent competitive advantage by distinguishing one school from another. To demonstrate the relative merit, high stakes testing is a key mechanism of marketisation. School quality is tied to the performance of students on tests.

The Centre for Economics of Education at the London School of Economics has an extensive program researching the relationship between competition, choice and pupil achievement. The range of projects presents little evidence that there is any benefit to parents and students in choice of school. The evidence is that school competition increases inequality with high and low achieving pupils more segregated in schools as a result of more competition. This suggests that whatever performance

advantage choice could offer the students in education, 'choice' is detrimental because it results in increased social polarisation. The problem is more exaggerated in secondary schools. (Gibbons et al, 2006)

Evidence of the deepening stratification of education

(Apple, 2001; Hill, 2008) needs to be seen against neo-liberal market practices implemented in conjunction with a fanfare of political rhetoric that declares that the working class and minority groups will have greater opportunities under the new organisational mechanisms.

language of 'targets' is one that fragments the problem of real educational improvement. An improvement

of students on a particular literacy test may well have been achieved at the cost of real learning.

Standardised testing dumbs down the curriculum

If schools, teachers and students are measured by what is in high stakes tests then the problem of what to teach will inevitably be narrowed to what is in the tests. The decisions about what to teach is determined by the particular range of literacy and numeracy skills contained in the tests.

In the USA it is argued "that literacy achievement can be improved through a pedagogy which asserts 'alphabets' or phonics is the solution to overcoming low test scores. Subsequently the assumption of NCLB [the No Child Left Behind legislation] is that overall literacy outcomes and those of at risk students in particular require a standardised curriculum...that programs that script, monitor and benchmark teachers' everyday teaching can be implemented across schools, communities, and student cohorts to achieve a better and more uniform spread of the optimal method for teaching literacy." (Luke and Wood, 2007)

In England, the critique is of the narrowness of literacy and numeracy strategies which have accompanied the high-stakes tests. These narrow strategies focus classroom teachers on skills to enable students to perform to the test. The strategies even include a timeline suggesting how to prepare for the tests. Sets of "booster" materials or lesson plans are part of the package. These test-focussed lessons are designed to

improve the score of students at risk of not demonstrating skills required in the test. Learning becomes fragmented as skills are taught as de-contextualised and often meaningless activities.

The underlying assumption in these approaches is that teachers cannot be trusted and so the test is a mechanism to force teachers to comply with a particular theory of learning. The assumption is that student failure occurs because teachers don't know how to teach.

The limitations of these simplistic literacy strategies is that they ignore the host of contributing factors identified in research, "... factors like home/school transitions and access, the variable impacts of community, cultural and linguistic background, the effects of poverty, the increasing incidence of special needs...the impacts of differential school resourcing...and internal tracking structures of schools." (Luke and Wood, 2007)

Considered too costly for governments intent on shrinking the public sector are a whole range of policy directions beyond test results that would be far more effective in addressing the gap in performance. Accountability should occur to support real educational social change that will contribute to all students' educational outcomes.

Beware targets

In both the USA and England formal "targets" are centrally set in relation to test performance. Principals, teachers and schools are required to meet these targets. The supposition is that these targets will improve student learning and if achieved, schools will have become more productive.

The targets based upon test results are used to imply some notions of efficiency in the way schools conduct their work. The theory is that teachers are

forced to focus attention on each child's needs, and ratchet up standards. (Mansell) The effectiveness of teachers is brought into question if schools fail to meet these targets; the targets themselves are rarely questioned.

'Targets' are narrow, defined in terms of the limited deconstructed skills that happen to be the content of the tests. 'Targets' are expressed in terms of anticipated improvement in the next round of testing. The

PISA: Towards an international league table

At a meeting in Sweden the educators referred to Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) data as the “international league tables”!

The Australian media has provided significant coverage of the release of PISA data and the analysis of international comparative trends. The high performance of Australian students has been noted with pride by Australian education authorities and governments. Significant press coverage on the data from McGaw indicated a high level of inequity of educational achievement as measured by the survey tools.

Since 2000 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has conducted PISA.

PISA aims “to measure how far students approaching the end of compulsory schooling have acquired some of the knowledge and skills essential for full participation in the knowledge society.” (OECD, 2007a)

PISA represents a commitment by the 57 participating countries to monitor the outcomes of education systems in terms of student achievement on a regular basis, within an internationally agreed common framework, and in innovative ways that reflect judgments about the skills that are relevant to adult life. PISA seeks to assess not merely whether students can reproduce what they have learned in science, mathematics and reading, but also how well they can extrapolate from what they have learned and apply their knowledge in new situations. PISA also collects extensive data on student, family and institutional factors that can help to explain differences in the performance of countries. (OECD, 2007b)

In 2000, 2003 and 2006, surveys of students have been conducted in reading, mathematics and science. While in each of the years all three learning areas are covered a major focus has been taken in each of the areas in turn; thus in 2006 the PISA assessment, while assessing reading and mathematics, had a major focus on scientific knowledge.

In addition to collecting data on student perform-

ance in the key subject areas, PISA also collects data on students’ motivation to learn, their beliefs about themselves and their learning strategies. The principals at the schools involved in the assessment also supply data about their school. This provides a fuller picture of comparative education systems and takes into account social and cultural factors that are associated with students’ performance on the test.

The PISA survey reports provide a comparison on sub groups within national populations, thus gender and socio economic status are used to compare groups of students within a national cohort. The interaction of factors from home and school, and their potential to influence the development of knowledge and skills can be examined. The data analysis compares the quality of student performance standards and the equity in learning outcomes within the educational, social and cultural contexts in which the particular education systems operate. (OECD, 2007a)

OECD member countries and a growing list of partner countries participate in the sample survey. Unlike the whole-cohort tests in USA and England, PISA does not track individual students and so cannot provide causal links.

To complete the survey each participating country needs to provide a sample of 15 year old students. In Australia this involves approximately 12,000 students nationwide. Although called a survey the students sit a two hour test involving multiple choice and open ended questions. As a sample survey, PISA is a rather different tool to those national surveys that have been reported on here.

These kinds of measuring tools of students’ knowledge are limited by the assumptions and biases underlying the construction of the tests. PISA claims to be independent of specific curriculum and asserts it is an assessment of the young people’s ability to use or apply their knowledge and skills to ‘real life’ challenges.

Bonderup Dohn questions the validity of this assertion, because, as she demonstrates, PISA is not an assessment of “knowledge and skills for life” but only of “knowledge and skills for life in an assessment situation”. Further errors of ambiguity and cultural bias in the PISA test need to be taken into account as a reminder of the limitations of what is

being measured and what conclusions are drawn from the PISA data. (Bonderup Dohn, 2007)

McGaw (2007) reported the 2006 PISA survey results demonstrated that although Australia achieved high on the PISA studies in overall performance, there was a wide disparity between the highest and lowest achievers.

Schools divide on the basis of gender, on the basis of faith, on the basis of social class. The only thing that is common is schooling. What we need to do is find ways in which schooling with its separate expressions in schools of different kinds, can, in fact, bridge the difference and not sharpen the differences. (McGaw)

OECD–PISA and educational globalisation

There has been agreement for another round of PISA surveys 2009–2015, which will allow countries to consider “trend data to measure improvements in educational outcomes and the ability to monitor the change in education systems over time”. (OECD, 2007a)

The global impact of projects like PISA should be determined with a clear consideration of the economic and political orientations of the parent organisation, the OECD. Henry argues that it has been strongly influenced by the market liberalism of its chief partner, the USA, with a counter tension which has always been there: concern for equity, inclusion and social cohesion. (Henry et al, 2001)

With the advent of PISA the “ideological debates have thus been replaced with technical questions of how to promote trade and monitor neo-liberal reforms in the entire range of the OECD’s policy concerns from industrial relations and infrastructure to immigration and education”. (Rizvi and Lingard, 2006)

Rizvi and Lingard suggest that over the past decade or so, the OECD agenda in education has become increasingly focused on social efficiency. PISA has

The differences among Australian schools are much more influenced by whom they enrol than by what they do. This has been long held knowledge of our school systems and has been well documented in research since the 1960s, both in Australia and internationally.

PISA compares the data between public and private schools in OECD countries that have both, except for Australia. Comparison between government and non government sectors is not compiled as this is an agreed condition of Australia’s participation in the PISA survey. For those countries where government/private school data is published the performance of private schools is not significantly different from that of public schools once the effects of the differences in social background of students are removed. In many cases private school students perform less well.

manifested a numbers approach to educational governance.

Global neo-liberalism has brought a new international notion to education. This notion is characterised by “ideas about educational governance linked to new public management, which increasingly promote corporatized and privatised administration of education, outcome measures and knowledge as commodity”. (Rizvi and Lingard)

The accountability regimes in the England and the USA, and increasingly Australia, are clearly a result of the impact of these ways of thinking about schooling and education.

Social justice and equity are part of the education agenda of the OECD, but in the USA and England the concepts have been watered down by being rearticulated away from a strong definition of social justice towards social capital and social inclusion concerns. (Rizvi and Lingard)

With this analysis in mind, the role of PISA as a mechanism of globalisation of educational policies in Australia should be considered cautiously.

Finland's success in the international tests of student performance

Since the publication of the first PISA results in 2001 Finland has been inundated with international visitors keen to understand what it is about Finnish education that means that students in this country of five million people produce consistently high results. The number of visitors has almost been beyond the scope of the

Ministry and Board of Education to handle. This gives a hint of power and potential influence of what it means for education systems around the world to receive a high ranking in the OECD comparative data.

The Ministry of Education in Finland provided the following account of Finnish students' performance:

The skills of Finnish students were among the best in all domains assessed in PISA surveys (2000, 2003, and 2006).

- In reading literacy: first place in two surveys (2000, 2003) and second place (2006)

- In mathematics, Finnish students were fourth (2000) and second (2003) and first (2006)

- In science, they were third (2000), joint first (2003) and first (2006)

- In problem-solving skills, they were joint second (2003, not assessed in 2000)

- Finland's score (2006) is the best result ever achieved in any subject area in any of the PISA surveys.

The uniformity of students' performance is a special forte in Finland. The differences between the strongest and weakest results in Finland are among the smallest in the survey. Differences between schools and regions are also remarkably small in Finland. Differences in performance were very slight between various language groups in Finland, and the socio-economic background has a lower impact on students' performance here than in the other PISA countries. A significant implication is that high performance can be achieved with relatively low differences in performance between students.

Finnish students spend less time per week studying than their counterparts in the OECD countries on average and the annual expenditure on education is the OECD average. The reason for Finland's success is therefore not due to these factors.

Background to Finland's success

Equal opportunities

The Finnish education system offers everybody equal opportunities for education, irrespective of domicile, sex, economic situation or linguistic and cultural background. The school network is regionally extensive, and there are no sex-specific school services. Basic education is completely free of charge (including instruction, school materials, school meals, health care, dental care, commuting, special needs education and remedial teaching).

Comprehensiveness of education

Basic education encompasses nine years and caters for all those between 7 and 16 years. Schools do not select their students but every student can go to the school of his or her own [choice in their] school district. Students are neither channelled to different schools nor streamed.

Competent teachers

On all school levels, teachers are highly qualified and committed. They require Master's degrees, and teacher education includes teaching practice. As the teaching profession is very popular in Finland, universities can select the most motivated and talented applicants. Teachers work independently and have strong autonomy towards their work.

Student counselling and special needs education

Individual support for the learning and welfare of pupils is well accommodated, and the national core curriculum contains guidelines for the purpose. Special needs education is integrated into regular education as far as possible. Guidance counsellors help upper grade students in their choice of further education and studying methods.

Encouraging evaluation

The evaluation of the learning outcomes of schools and students is encouraging and supportive by nature. The aim is to produce information that helps both schools and students develop. There are no national testing of learning outcomes, school ranking lists or inspection systems.

Significance of education in society

Finnish society strongly favours education and the population is highly educated by international standards. Education is

appreciated and there is a broad political consensus on education policy.

A flexible system based on empowerment

The education system is flexible and the administration is strongly based on delegation and support. Centralised steering is conducted through the aims set by laws and decrees as well as by the national core curriculum. Municipalities are responsible for the organisation of education and the implementation of the aims. Schools and teachers have a lot of independent autonomy in the provision and contents of education.

Co-operation

Interaction and building of partnerships is sought at all levels of activity. There is co-operation for the development of schools between various levels of administration, between schools and between other social actors and schools. Education authorities work in co-operation with teachers' organisations, subject associations and school leadership organisations. This has provided strong support for development activities.

A student-oriented, active conception of learning

The organisation of schoolwork and education is based on a conception of learning that focuses on students' activity and interaction with the teacher, other students and the learning environment.

Ministry of Education, Helsinki, 2007

The understandings of what contributes to the apparent educational success of Finnish children in the PISA survey has been documented by the Ministry of Education and were largely endorsed by the Finnish teachers union.

The explanation for students' performance focuses on the education system and does not look at the social context of schools. The potential influences of socio-cultural characteristics of Finnish society have not been considered.

Finnish society is not highly divided on socio-economic basis; different schools do not reflect dif-

ferent socio-economic populations. School choice does not act as a definer of class divisions between different school communities. (OECD, 2007a)

Social welfare programs may well address the impact of what might otherwise be socio-economic differences in students. The consistently high performance by 15 years old in Finland may tell us as much about the society they live in, and how social factors might influence how students respond.

It was also even put to me that as Finnish television relies on the use of subtitles there is plenty of incidental support to the learning of reading, one of the key areas in PISA.

Finland does not have standardised tests marked centrally with data held for comparison of schools. National tests are provided for teachers to use as diagnostic assessment and for self moderation of standards.

A member of the Finnish teachers union said, that, in spite of the strong performance of students in the PISA assessment, there are worrying trends from the current government. There is an ideological push for changes in the comprehensive nature of schooling and these changes are being presented as a way of getting greater efficiency in educational delivery. These changes reflect the impact of neoliberal ideology within the current government of Finland. On the agenda is increased privatisation introducing choice and greater competition at the expense of equality of outcomes. Along with the publication of test results as ostensibly an aid to choice, this demonstrates the hypocrisy of those who boast about Finnish schools but then move to corrupt them.

The Finnish teachers union does not support these changes and face similar struggles as teacher unions elsewhere including Australia.

What is private is necessarily good and what is public is necessarily bad. Public institutions such as schools are ‘black holes’ into which money is poured — and then seemingly disappears — but which do not provide anywhere near adequate results. For neoliberals, one form of rationality is more powerful than any other — economic rationality. Efficiency and an ‘ethic’ of cost-benefit analysis are the dominant norms. All people are to act in ways that maximise their own personal benefits. Indeed, behind this position is an empirical claim that this is how all rational actors act. Yet, rather than being a neutral description of the world of social motivation, this is actually a construction of the world around the valuative characteristics of an efficiently acquisitive class type. (Apple, 2001)

Resistance

In the midst of the gloom of political interference in education across the USA there are some dynamic groups that are working for change to create fairer, more educationally sound and more democratic education for all young people. These groups provide support to their members, campaign to communicate the anti standardised testing message, and directly lobby to bring about the abolition of legislation that compels teachers and students into constant testing and destroys quality education.

The opportunity to meet with some of these groups was valuable in that it gave some understanding of the

scope and nature of the campaigns in opposition to the current political agenda in education. These groups often consist of volunteers with educators and parents among their members. With limited finances they produce resources that both critique the test craze and the scramble to demonstrate standards. Another role of these organisations is the promotion of authentic system accountability and the promotion of alternative forms of assessment aimed at improving students’ learning and making schools responsive to the needs of working class children.

Fair Test

Fair Test is the name for the National Centre for Fair and Open Testing based in Massachusetts. This group exists through funding provided by sympathetic organisations and individuals to research and promote alternatives to the standardised testing phenomena that have pervaded the USA since the 1980s.

Fair Test produces clear and accessible resources that explain the nature of standardised tests and the history and origins of the phenomena. The

organisation also promotes “better ways of evaluating students” and advocates using the information to build students’ learning as part of the everyday practice of classroom work.

Fair Test also provides support to other groups across the USA that campaign to rid the schools of the destructive legislation that uses long discredited accountability and testing practices to control schools.

www.fairtest.org/

Parents United for Responsible Education

Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE), is an affiliated organisation of Fair Test. PURE is based in Chicago. For more than 20 years this group has acted to “assure a high quality public education for all children by informing parents about educational issues and parent rights, bringing parents into the decision making process, empowering parents in their role as advocates for their

children, and assisting them in their interactions within the school system”. (PURE’s Mission Statement, 2007)

The importance of building partnerships between teachers and parents, to achieve a high quality education for all children, is reinforced by this group’s work which also actively campaigns to end No Child Left Behind.

www.pureparents.org/

Substance News

Substance News has been a newspaper for defenders of public schools since the late 1970s. This group publishes regularly, providing information about the political manoeuvrings around public education provision in Chicago. The abolition of No Child Left Behind is a key

focus. Equally important is the campaign to redress the under-resourced provision of education in the highly segregated schools of inner city Chicago.

www.substancenews.net/webupdates/oct_17_2007.html

Coalition for Better Education

Coalition for Better Education was started as a group of parents and educators who united for the common purpose of raising awareness, and supporting parent and teachers to opt out of the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP). As Coalition for Better Education says in its campaign materials:

- Colorado spends more than \$16 million to administer CSAP.
- Students in grades 3–10 take the CSAP every year.
- CSAP is a high-stakes test that puts a lot of pressure on teachers and students.
- CSAP has resulted in the curtailment of instruction in areas not covered by the test, such as foreign lan-

guages, social studies, and even science. (Science is not going to be tested until later.)

- CSAP does not measure a child's overall academic ability.
- Many educators take more than a month out of their normal curriculum to prepare and test for CSAP.
- Teaching to the test promotes shallow learning and decreases critical thinking skills and creativity.
- Teachers do not receive CSAP scores to assess their current students until they have moved on to the next grade level.
- Many educators believe CSAP is taking the fun out of school for children.

www.thecbe.org/index.htm

Educator Roundtable

Educator Roundtable is a national alliance with the purpose to improve education related legislation, with No Child Left Behind as the target. A nationwide petition to this effect is currently underway. The following statement sums up this group's critique of American education:

“Democracy and Education

“Over the past six years this country has seen the Constitution discarded, the military privatized, the church married to the state, women's reproductive rights repealed, gangster-style cronyism, gross incompetence, and propaganda campaigns of Orwellian proportions.

“None of these abuses would have been possible if our country had educated children towards becoming the types of adults capable of recognizing and acting against threats to life, liberty, and happiness.

“If we continue to force children to memorize the dates of wars without asking why we have perpetual war; if we continue to force children to memorize mathematical precepts without understanding how and why we use math; if we continue to force children to learn to read while ignoring literacy, we should not expect anything

different than what we have had for many years: a bewildered herd.

“If we want something much different for our children, for our communities, and indeed for the world, then we must take a more progressive approach to how we educate future citizens.

“If we want democracy, we must educate for democracy.

“Democracy is a form of associated living that fosters the growth of the individual through his or her participation in social affairs. Free, reflective, critical inquiry and the welfare of others undergird growth, interaction, and community building. Unlike authoritarian modes of government, democracy requires its members to participate in the political, social, cultural, and economic institutions affecting their development and, unlike authoritarian countries, democracies believe in the capacity of ordinary individuals to direct the affairs of their communities.

“Active participation in institutions prevents authoritarianism and allows for individual and community re-creation and

growth. Standardizing institutions, such as schools, does quite the opposite.

“The trajectory our schools now follow does not bode well for democracy.

“The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) might produce a hyper-productive, blindly obedient, worksheet completing citizenry capable of voting for American idols, but it will never engender a citizenry capable of recognizing and acting against threats to humanity. They will be too busy working harder, faster, and longer for less pay.

“Ultimately, NCLB removes teachers, students, parents, and local communities from active involvement in what will be learned, how it will be learned, and how to measure learning and development. Therefore the legislation prevents democratic reinvention and growth, as NCLB forces all communities to conform to a pre-determined and static version of what is true, beautiful, good, and profitable.”

www.educatorroundtable.org/

Rethinking Schools

Rethinking Schools is a non profit organisation that publishes high quality, clear and readable material advocating the democratic reform of elementary and secondary education in the USA. There is a strong emphasis on making schools more democratic insti-

tutions. Rethinking Schools' publication *Failing Our Kids: Why the Testing Craze Won't Fix Our Schools* is an inspiring and accessible read.

www.rethinkingschools.org

Teachers 4 Social Justice

Teachers 4 Social Justice is a grass roots teachers' organisation, organising to take back their classrooms by resisting standardised testing and commercial teaching resources. “They are no longer looking for ways to teach between the cracks of scripted curriculum. They are putting the scripts down and writing their own.”

At a conference in October 2007 in San Francisco, 1200 teachers shared teaching strategies and ideas

on education activism in opposition to the conservative, commercially produced curriculum.

Conference participants talked about ways to confront No Child Left Behind and top-down mandates that rob students of authentic and joyful learning and drain the time and energy of teachers who want to be more than the robotic hands of textbook companies.

www.t4sj.org/

The education revolution: Will it be standardised testing or education?

The choice for the new Labor Government, and indeed all state governments in Australia, is to decide to reject the neo-liberal ideology about efficiency and accountability in education. The consequences of not doing so are well demonstrated by observation of the implementation of these policies in the USA and England.

A compromise to whole-cohort standardised testing that inevitably distorts curriculum and what schools should be about could be sample testing. This may be a way of evaluating systemic trends without making individual student results a commodity valued in dollar terms. For teachers, evaluative processes must avoid de-skilling and de-professionalising their work if schools are to be educative domains.

Australian schools need a national curriculum that is not overly prescriptive, which supports teachers to be able and confident to contextualise their students' learning while at the same time ensuring that all students are provided with a broad empowering curriculum. Assessment should be about learning.

Teachers using observations of classroom interactions and the tasks that pupils engage in, evaluate

students' learning and determine the next step forward. In this way classroom practice will move from an emphasis on covering the curriculum to one that emphasises knowledge underpinned by understanding. Students will become more reflective and evaluate their own learning in partnership with their teachers. (Black et al, 2004)

Australian education policy makers must learn from the mistakes made elsewhere and ensure that public education is not destroyed by the imposition of market driven accountability. High stakes testing, league tables and competition will not produce more efficient teaching and improved student outcomes.

Just as invasion, war, and occupation have not been routes to peace and democracy in Iraq, more and more of us now realize that 'standards', rote curriculum, tests, and sanctions are not passages to educational equality. (http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/22_02/edit222.shtml)

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Testing times

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