

# FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

**Michelle Fine**

**Deborah W. Meier “Heroes in Education” Award**

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*[These are notes from which Michelle delivered her talk on receiving FairTest’s ‘Heroes in Education’ award. You can still make a gift in Michelle’s honor by going to <https://secure.entango.com/donate/MnrXjT8MQqk>.]*

Thanks to honorary chairs, host committee, friends from NY and MCAS/Montclair, and everyone here.

Looking at this room, I am touched by the long sweet history of progressive education and solidarity among us in this long struggle for educational and racial justice, for fair and valid assessments, for integration, finance equity, for schools of laughter and inquiry.

And so I begin with 2 ERPs – a new metric brought to us by the provocative hauntings of Jean Anyon - Evidence of Radical Possibility:

1. As of May 20, 21 candidates backed by Long Island Opt Out won, 6 challenges ousting incumbents – and a total of 10,765 children opted out of state math exams – 1 in 8.
2. My dear friend Maxine Greene has been in the hospital and even in her slightly drug induced haze, half asleep, she mobilized herself to sing SOLIDARITY with her daughter in law Connie and myself, awoke and said, is it May 1?

We have been at this a long time...

Twenty years ago, when Ann, Debbie, Bob Stake, Phyllis and I would schlep to Albany, asking simply for a waiver to the Regents, we thought high stakes tests were simply bad for the soul and bad for our schools. I remember Debbie giving a stirring lecture to commissioner Rick Mills from Vermont, yelling at him, sitting across the table, ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.’ We were a particular breed of NY women to which he was, to put it mildly, unaccustomed. And we were naïve that this was a battle about assessments.



Since then the high stakes testing movement has metastasized and grown more obviously entangled with corporate reform, disruptive innovation, privatization of all things public, undermining unions and pensions, supporting real estate and urban re-development, the architecture of a more racially stratified America, evacuating school district central offices, and redistributing public dollars into corporate hands. Paul Krugman tells us it's about oligarchy and ignoring poverty and racism, shredding safety nets, and stealing the oxygen of democracy, the thrill of inquiry, the justice of equity, the fabric of the social good that may be a safety net for us all. WEB Du Bois, in *Crisis* magazine, told his readers the journal was designed to catalogue the ongoing moans of the darker race; moans that would be ignored until there was a profit to be made. As John Kuhn, superintendent in Texas said at the Network for Public Education, "Public education is our trust fund. We love our kids more than they love their portfolios."

Little did we know that the bite marks of neoliberalism and corporate reform were accumulating; that NYC would be declared, by Gary Orfield and colleagues, the most segregated school district in the country; testing would become the scientific ink to justify segregated schools, community control by elite white families, and corporations invading public schools; we couldn't have anticipated that 5000 School Safety Agents would work inside public schools – with handcuffs, metal detectors, and the capacity to arrest, accountable to the NYPD not the DOE; we couldn't imagine that kindergarten teachers would be complaining that children coming from "college and career" ready pre-Ks are already seemingly disruptive and developmentally disturbed.

We are in the midst of a massively well funded national human rights violation – bleeding from New Orleans, Detroit, Philadelphia, Newark –elites with too much money playing with education, a new frontier for innovation. Mark Zuckerberg is noted for saying to his fellow innovators, "move fast and break things." Well, I speak now to those of you who teach: You all work with children whose things have been broken. You remain in the communities, holding families, where the innovators got bored or things don't work out as they planned, and so they left.

We are in the middle of a storm and you have been the educators holding fragile umbrellas over the heads of children and families, as you are launching a movement for hope and assessment justice forward.

Kathleen Agüero, my newly discovered poet, writes on the heavy labor of hope...

### *In Hard Work*

*Hope springs eternal, but I couldn't imagine how hope, before it gets to that bubbling place, forces itself thru miles of dirt packed hard, willing itself not to dry up in the desert to merge with the sewer of a city street, resisting the warm and mindless absorption of mud, moss, sand, swamp until it finds the small trembling where, welcome or not, it gathers the last of its strength and breaks thru to the surface the way a laboring woman, stinking, exhausted, summons one last grunt and push to force the baby into the world where it takes its first sharp breath.*

*I bow my head to the hard work of hope. I let it place its dull and heavy hand upon my neck. I submit to its dour blessing. I give up. I begin its thankless, necessary pilgrimage.*

This is our work – and the existential weight of the labor is indeed heavy.

Now two to three decades into what Diane Ravitch has called the *Reign of Error*, we hear death stories from Philadelphia where two children lost their lives in part because there are no school nurses, reminiscent of the safe passage program initiated by Chicago Public Schools after the beating death of Fenger High School student Derrion Albert in 2009, predicted by parents concerned that children were forced to cross gang lines. Could you ever imagine these are stories of wealthy white children whose lives are jeopardized by educational policy?

As a nation have withdrawn from “race conscious” educational policies such as affirmative action and school desegregation, and retreated on finance equity, all of which coincided with the largest reductions in opportunity and achievement gaps. We invest instead in policies which widen inequality gaps including unregulated charter expansion, selective admissions, school closings, unregulated choice determined by test scores, invalid and punishing teacher evaluations and now the ranking of universities based on graduation rate, debt and post-graduate earnings. I have taught at Penn and then got an honest job at CUNY. How do you think these two institutions will fare in the rankings? Who will be rewarded with federal support? And by the way, call me when they close down the proprietaries.

High stakes testing has become the multi-tasking magic bullet that can simultaneously tattoo a sense of failure onto bodies of color; narrow curriculum to thought-less context; evaluate teachers and diminish possibilities for tenure (and therefore pensions); close schools; and secure profits for corporate reform.

**But it’s our fight, and it will be our victory.**

The pushback is enormous: In Long Island alone, 10,765 children opted out of state math exams – that’s 1 in 8 students opted out; states are withdrawing from or diluting common core; labor is speaking up, legislators are trying to slow down implementation and even a few principals – what’s up with that? – are willing to challenge...

Across the country we witness the glorious staccato power of resistance at Garfield High School in Seattle; the teacher boycott of the Illinois Standards Achievement Test at Saucedo Scholastic Academy; Liz Phillips’ outstanding denouncement of Pearson’s gag rule, published in the *New York Times*. Resistance erupted in October, including New Mexico, Oklahoma, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Rhode Island, Florida, Texas and Mississippi. Students in Denver paraded as zombies holding signs reading, “[Testing Kills Brains](#).” Parents at Castle Bridge elementary school in New York City refused tests for young children, leading to their cancellation, and students at Stuyvesant High School also led a protest. Union Power prevailed in UTLA; progressive labor mobilizations have sprouted in Milwaukee, Portland, UFT, and Newark. The AFT has initiated a massive investment of labor-community cooperation, and with the SEIU, the NEA, Schott Foundation, CEJ, Dignity in Schools, Journeys to Justice, they are mobilizing labor and community in rich coalition. In Montclair NJ we find the brilliant and strategic organizing of the Montclair Education Association working in solidarity with Montclair Cares About Schools and the Civil Rights community. There was a most successful strike in Chicago supported by parents and community; the St. Paul Teacher’s Union initiated a walk through in solidarity by 2500 educators, students, parents...and my union, the PSC, has brilliantly mobilized for racial and educational justice, braiding the needs of workers and students as if they were redundant. This is hard work, and new solidarities are emerging

We kvell in De Blasio's victory in New York and Ras Baraka's victory in Newark. We recognize that [800 colleges do not require SAT/ACT](#), most recently Wesleyan. And a new report by the National Association for College Admissions Counseling, led by a former vice president at Bates College released a major study, analyzed academic records of 123,000 students at 33 institutions over six years, concluded that eliminating ACT/SAT requirements increases campus diversity without harming academic performance.

We enjoy new coalitions between suburbs and urban communities, e.g. there was fund raising and organizing for Baraka in Montclair, New Jersey, and planning for joint "Undoing Racism" workshops between our teachers.

We are surrounded by strategic eruptions of radical possibility in our midst; circuits of resistance moving across our cities... and into the suburbs:

I want to note thrilling elements of the resistance: Resistance across Scale, Horizontal Alliances, Surprising Solidarities

1. Stunning mobilization at various scales– federal, national, state and local
2. Strong collaborations of activists, practitioners, parents, civil rights activists, wealthy and disinvested communities, and researchers across place – Journey for Justice against school closings featuring among others Jitu Brown in Chicago and Sharon Smith in Newark, and their remarkable publication – [Death by 1000 cuts](#). Lawyers, activists, educators, youth are organized to document and resist racial and sexual disparities in discipline. Across the nation we see strong support for Parents Across America, the Testing Resistance and Reform Spring, Save Our Schools, and the Network for Public Education
3. Within communities – surprising solidarities are blossoming
  - Unions and parents/communities – incredible activism by AFT on this front
  - Critical alliances connecting diverse movements for access to higher education: e.g. abolish the box (college access for persons who have spent time in prison), with support for access and financial aid for undocumented students, affirmative action and the struggle to remove SATs as primary admissions criteria; this is crucial given that public universities are HIGHLY dependent now – and proud of it – on SAT scores, remediation... all of these testing cul de sacs that keep students of color and working class students detoured from persistence and graduation while elite colleges (like private k – 12 schools) refuse to engage the indignities of testing and are waiving out of SAT/ACT for admission
  - strong new coalitions, particularly beginning to understand the connections between **drop out factories, high stakes testing and aggressive suspension** policies – New York Civil Liberties Union, The Public Science Project, The Advancement Project and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund
  - mental health advocates are joining with educators to call for restorative justice, school based health clinics and social workers rather than more police and more testing
  - pre-school educators are beginning to document the perverse, developmentally inappropriate consequences of "college and career readiness" on three and four year olds
  - higher education faculty are FINALLY understanding the struggle and joining in solidarity with our k – 12 colleagues (with apologies that we are late to the game)

- other labor organizations, e.g. SEIU, living wage campaigns...(we need horizontal alliances with other labor organizing groups)

And so I end with an activist plea:

When my father was dying in 2000, in New Hampshire, one of those outstanding ICU nurses who said I am the last generation to know the difference between what is and what must be. The erasure and erosion of progressive education is a well funded gentrification of the mind.

We must invest in *foundational anchor organizations* that have nourished the educational imagination for decades –

1. [FairTest](#)
2. The NY Performance Standards C
3. Rethinking Schools and
4. Free Minds/Free People

These organizations have survived the storm; have nourished our hope; have widened the educational imaginations of the public, educators and youth. They have enabled educational oxygen to continue to circulate during the chilling years of privatization.

So I ask that you invest in these organizations – or another of your choice: make contributions, name them in your wills, give gift certificates to your grand children, graduates, and anonymous gifts to the children of reformers who live in your neighborhood, and buy Rethinking Schools for your School Board Members as an act of “civility.”

Safe Travels home, and Debbie, Sophie, Ann, Monty... I am honored and humbled.