Reforms and the “Thinking Curriculum”

“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”

- Paulo Freire, Pedagogy Of The Oppressed

We have patiently taught under the policies of market-based education reforms and have long since concluded that they constitute a subversion of the democratic ideals of public education. Policymakers have adopted the reforms of business leaders and economists without consideration for the diverse stakeholders whose participation is necessary for true democratic reform. We have neglected an important debate on the purpose and promise of public education while students have been subjected to years of experimental and shifting high-stakes tests with no proven correlation between those tests and future academic success. The tests have been routinely flawed in design and scoring, and do not meaningfully inform classroom instruction. Test scores have also been misapplied to the evaluation of teachers and schools, creating a climate of sanctions that is misguided and unsupportive.

In your first speech as Chancellor, you spoke of the importance of critical thinking, or a “thinking curriculum” in education. We know you to be a proponent of critical pedagogy, part of the progressive education tradition. As teachers, we hold critical thinking and critical literacies in highest regard. As professionals, we resolve to not be passive consumers of education marketing or unthinking implementers of unproven policy reforms. We believe critical thinking, artistry, and democracy to be among the cornerstones of public education. We want creative, “thinking” students who are equipped to be the problem solvers of today and tomorrow; equipped to tackle our most vexing public problems: racial and economic disparity, discrimination, homelessness, hunger, violence, environmental degradation, public health, and all other problems foreseen and unforeseen. We want students to love learning and to be insatiable in their inquiries. However, it is a basic truism of classroom life and sound pedagogy that institutional policies should reflect the values and habits of mind we intend to impart on our students. It becomes incongruous, therefore, to charge our students to think critically and question, while burdening our schools with policies that frustrate teachers’ efforts to implement a “thinking curriculum,” perpetuating historic inequalities in public education.

The “Crisis of Education” and a Crisis of Pedagogy

Business leaders and economists have used reductive arguments to identify a “crisis of education” while branding educational success words such as achievement, effectiveness, and

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performance as synonymous with standardized test scores. The majority of education policy decisions are now guided by test scores, making standardized tests an indispensable product. Market-based reforms have been an excellent model of corporate demand creation--branding the disease and selling the cure. Stanford education professor Linda-Darling Hammond described policymakers' mistaken reliance on standardized tests when she wrote, “There is a saying that American students are the most tested, and the least examined, of any in the world. We test students in the U.S. far more than any other nation, in the mistaken belief that testing produces greater learning.”

The narrow pursuit of test results has sidelined education issues of enduring importance such as poverty, equity in school funding, school segregation, health and physical education, science, the arts, access to early childhood education, class size, and curriculum development. We have witnessed the erosion of teachers’ professional autonomy, a narrowing of curriculum, and classrooms saturated with “test score-raising” instructional practices that betray our understandings of child development and our commitment to educating for artistry and critical thinking. And so now we are faced with “a crisis of pedagogy”--teaching in a system that no longer resembles the democratic ideals or tolerates the critical thinking and critical decision-making that we hope to impart on the students we teach.

For-Profit Standardized Tests as Snake Oil

The keystone of market-based reforms--highly dependent on the mining and misuse of quantifiable data--has been the outsourcing of standardized test production to for-profit education corporations. In New York State, a single British-based corporation, Pearson PLC, manages standardized testing for grades 3-8, gifted and talented testing, college-based exams for prospective teachers, and New York State teacher certification exams. Contracts currently held by Pearson include: $32.1 million five-year contract, which began in 2011, for the creation of English Language Arts and Math assessments; $6.2 million three-year contract in 2012 to create an online education data portal; $1 million five-year contract, which began in 2010, to create and administer field tests; $200,000 contract through the Office of General Services for books and materials.

Pearson’s management of testing in New York has resulted in a series of high-profile errors. In 2012, questions pertaining to an 8th grade ELA passage about a pineapple and a hare

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had to be thrown out after they were found to be nonsensical. It was also discovered that test questions had been previously used by Pearson in other state exams. In total, 29 questions had to be eliminated from the tests that year, prompting New York State Board of Regents Chancellor Merryl Tisch to comment, "The mistakes that have been revealed are really disturbing. What happens here as a result of these mistakes is that it makes the public at large question the efficacy of the state testing system." That same year, 7,000 elementary and middle school students were banned from their graduation ceremonies after they were mistakenly recorded as having failed their state tests.

In 2013, a version of the ELA state test for eighth graders contained a reading passage that was included in test prep materials published by Pearson, giving schools that had purchased those materials an unfair advantage. The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project established a website following the 2013 ELA tests to solicit feedback from teachers. Teachers widely criticized Pearson’s interpretation of Common Core standards for the close reading of nonfiction texts. Teachers also cited many instances of poorly worded, confusing, and unanswerable questions as well as widespread reports of students running out of time. Also, in 2013, Pearson made three errors in scoring tests for gifted and talented programs resulting in 2,700 students being mistakenly told that they were ineligible. A month later, a second error was found, qualifying an additional 300 students for seats.

Aside from testing errors, Pearson has been accused of violating state law. In December, Pearson reached a $7.7 million settlement with the New York State Attorney General’s office after it was revealed that its charity, the Pearson Foundation, was used to seek endorsements and donations from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for a series of courses based on Common Core Learning Standards. Pearson intended to sell the courses

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commercially, profiting from the endorsements.¹³

**Standardization and the Privatization of Public Education**

The blurring of foundation and corporate purposes has been quite common in the era of market-based education reform. The Broad, Walton, and Bill & Melinda Gates foundations are often cited as the super-funders of the reforms.¹⁴ The Gates Foundation was the primary underwriter for the development of the Common Core State Standards. National standardization is a primary goal of the reforms because it creates an incentive for private investment. The diversity of the American system of education creates disparate markets and reformers are well-aware of the problems it poses for investment.

Educational disparity, not standardization, has been a distinguishing characteristic of the American Education system along with the enduring effects of school segregation and inequality. Standards and learning objectives have varied widely by state and even school district. The educational philosophies and specializations of individual schools are similarly diverse, as are the instructional practices of teachers. There is potential strength in a diverse school system that is also able to provide equitable resources and reconcile the ills of school segregation—a school system that can adapt to the diverse needs of communities at a local level and innovate. But educational diversity makes the widespread adoption of standardized products infeasible. From their inception, Common Core Learning Standards have been heralded as an opportunity for privatization and the standardization of educational products. Bill Gates offered this explanation to the National Conference of State Legislatures in 2009:

> When the tests are aligned to the common standards, the curriculum will line up as well—and that will unleash powerful market forces in the service of better teaching. For the first time, there will be a large base of customers eager to buy products that can help every kid learn and every teacher get better. Imagine having the people who create electrifying video games applying their intelligence to online tools that pull kids in and make algebra fun.¹⁵

In a 2011 Op-Ed piece in the Wall Street Journal entitled “The Steve Jobs Model For Education Reform,” Rupert Murdoch presented a similar perspective:

> Everything we need to do is possible now. But the investments the private sector needs to make will not happen until we have a clear answer to a basic question: What is the

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core body of knowledge our children need to know?

I don't pretend to be an expert on academic standards. But as a business leader, I do know something about how common standards unlock investment and unleash innovation. For example, once we established standards for MP3 and Wi-Fi, innovators had every incentive to invest their brains and capital in building the very best products compatible with those standards.16

In all, 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core standards. Such sweeping national alignment on standardization is unprecedented in an educational system built on state and local control. Federal law prohibits the federal government from prescribing curriculum, so it is uncommon that federal policies would succeed in influencing national standardization and curriculum. However, states eagerly adopted the “voluntary” Common Core standards along with test-centric policies to compete for $4.35 billion in “Race to the Top” federal funding. New York state was awarded the largest portion of the funding at $700 million. Considering that New York City’s annual education budget alone is $24.8 billion, the one-time award of $700 million was a small price for the federal government to pay in order to enshrine Common Core standards, data systems, “value-added” teacher evaluations, and test-centric curriculum in our state education laws.

Unlocking Investment: Public Tax Dollars and Private Vendors

With Common Core standards “voluntarily” endorsed by a large market of 45 states, education corporations are “investing” as foretold by Gates and Murdoch. New York State recently spent $28 million in Race To The Top federal taxpayer dollars to have four companies develop Math and English Language Arts curriculum.17 $14 million of the $28 million was awarded to a company called Common Core Inc. to develop Common Core aligned math curriculum.18 The curriculum was incomplete at the start of the 2013-2014 school year. Although the curriculum was designed for New York, its Common Core-based content is applicable to all states that have adopted the standards, making it possible for the company to resell its content to other states.19

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has taken further steps to make public education, and education tax dollars, accessible to corporations by mining student data. The Gates foundation, with co-sponsorship from the Carnegie foundation, spent $100 million to create

InBloom, a cloud database to store student’s private data with the hope that it would become the clearinghouse for mining data across Common Core invested states.\textsuperscript{20} Nine states, including New York, originally agreed to participate, but amid privacy concerns, all of the states except New York have withdrawn. In November, twelve public school parents filed a lawsuit seeking a restraining order to prevent student data from being uploaded. The State Superior Court heard the case on January 10, 2014.\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{Common Core Reforms and Skirting Democracy}

Common Core is a privately funded and privately managed initiative, despite being branded as a “state-led effort” involving “content experts, teachers, researchers and others.”\textsuperscript{22} The design and the adoption of the standards lacked adequate public involvement and was not subjected to legislative oversight. Despite claims of college and career readiness, the standards remain experimental—there is no guarantee of future success.\textsuperscript{23} The most significant flaw in the design process was the exclusion of early childhood education experts. Edward Miller and Nancy Carlsson-Paige reviewed the committees formed to write and review the Common Core standards and found that not a single early childhood teacher or expert was involved.\textsuperscript{24} They also noted that public comments on the standards were redacted and do not reflect strong objections from early childhood educators and researchers. For example, in 2010, more than 500 early childhood professionals signed the Joint Statement of Early Childhood Health and Education Professionals, which stated:

\begin{quote}
We have grave concerns about the core standards for young children now being written by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. The draft standards made public in January conflict with compelling new research in cognitive science, neuroscience, child development, and early childhood education about how young children learn, what they need to learn, and how best to teach them in kindergarten and the early grades.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{25} Alliance for Childhood (2010, March 2). Joint statement of early childhood health and education professionals on the Common Core standards initiative. \texttt{http://www.edweek.org/media/joint_statement_on_core_standards.pdf}
The statement raised concerns that Common Core would lead to a new series of standardized tests for younger grades, which they characterized as “unreliable and inappropriate.” At the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year, parents at Castle Bridge Elementary school in Washington Heights refused to have their children subjected to a series of new standardized tests based on the Common Core. Parents wrote, “To the city and state Departments of Education: testing K–2 children is not acceptable and developmentally inappropriate, excessive, and destructive.”

Castle Bridge’s act of civil disobedience is a logical response to a state Education Department that has proven obstinate to dissenting opinion while, themselves, pursuing policies that skirt the democratic process. Letters have been written, petitions signed, and forums held, but there have been few signs of democratic representation. In reference to a dissent-laden listening tour, State Commission John King concluded, “I think the debate about whether we need higher standards is a settled debate. It is really a question of how do we continue to support people through the implementation.” In other words, the state’s adoption of Common Core along with its accompanying tests and curriculum—the Board of Regent’s choice package of “higher” albeit untested standards—is a settled debate, and teachers are expected to be dutiful implementers.

The Voices of Dissent

In April of 2013, Veteran teacher Gerald J. Conti, a social studies teacher at Westhill High School in Syracuse, New York, became fed up with playing the role of dutiful implementer and submitted his letter of resignation. In the letter, he cited Common Core and incessant high-stakes testing as creating an “atmosphere of distrust” and a “dramatic and rapid decaying of morale.” He concluded, “After writing all of this I realize that I am not leaving my profession, in truth, it has left me. It no longer exists.” In a letter to her 8th grade students, veteran 8th grade teacher, Ruth Ann Dandrea, described the 2012 New York State ELA test as “a test you need to fail.” In characterizing the pedagogical dilemma teachers find themselves in as test administrators, she addressed her students directly: “Continue to question. I applaud you, sample writer: When asked the either/or question, you began your response, “Honestly, I think it is both.” You were right, and you were brave, and the test you were taking was neither.”

Another educator, Carol Burris, has been consistent in her dissent from market-based reforms. She is Principal of Southside High School in the Rockville Centre School District and was named Educator of the Year in 2010 and High School Principal of the Year in 2013 by the School Administrators Association of New York State. In response to the outcomes of the 2013 state tests, she and seven of her colleagues wrote an open letter to parents and children of New York State that was co-signed by 545 principals and 3,000 additional supporters. The authors wrote candidly about what is known and unknown about the state testing program.

Please know that we, your school principals, care about your children and will continue to do everything in our power to fill their school days with learning that is creative, engaging, challenging, rewarding and joyous. We encourage you to dialogue with your child’s teachers so that you have real knowledge of his skills and abilities across all areas. If your child scored poorly on the test, please make sure that he does not internalize feelings of failure. We believe that the failure was not on the part of our children, but rather with the officials of the New York State Education Department. These are the individuals who chose to recklessly implement numerous major initiatives without proper dialogue, public engagement or capacity building. They are the individuals who have failed.  

That same coalition of principals wrote a scathing critique of the Annual Professional Performance Review legislation (APPR), which based principal and teacher evaluations on student's test scores using value-added modeling. The letter was signed by 1,539 principals, over one third of all principals in New York State, along with over 6,100 supporters.  

We, Principals of New York State schools, concluded that the proposed APPR process is an unproven system that is wasteful of increasingly limited resource. More importantly, it will prove to be deeply demoralizing to educators and harmful to children in our care. Our students are more than the sum of their tests scores, and an overemphasis on test scores will not result in better learning.

A group of eight “Teachers of The Year” in New York wrote a separate letter to the Board of Regents, voicing similar concerns:

It is with sadness, pain and frustration that we write this letter. We, the undersigned New York State Teachers of the Year, are deeply concerned about recent changes to the State Education Department's Annual Professional Performance Review system. These

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changes, while politically popular, will neither improve schools nor increase student learning; rather, they will cause tangible harm to students and teachers alike.³²

Carol Burris initiated a petition to Governor Cuomo and the state legislature calling for a moratorium on high-stakes testing. The letter received 14,100 signatures.

We, the undersigned, support higher standards that are reasonably designed, implemented with care, and accompanied by the resources schools need to achieve them. The New York State testing program has undermined the implementation of higher standards, by creating a test-driven environment that does not serve our children well. High stakes testing continues to waste precious taxpayer dollars and student learning time. It is time to say, “no more”.³³

Many educational researches have been highly critical of market-based education reforms. Distinguished education professor Linda Darling-Hammond has authored numerous articles pointing to the harm that reforms have done to the teaching profession, including Value Added Evaluation Hurts Teaching. She cited studies from the National Research Council, the RAND Corporation, and the Educational Testing Service that recommend against using standardized test scores in the form of value-added modeling to make high-stakes decisions about students, teachers, and principals.³⁴ In April 2013, The Economic Policy Institute released a report titled “Market-oriented education reforms’ rhetoric trumps reality,” which examined reforms in Washington D.C., New York, and Chicago. The authors concluded that reformers in those cities had made false claims regarding rising test scores and had failed to deliver on promises to close the widening achievement gap. They concluded that the practical impact of reforms had, in some cases, undermined stated objectives.

As discussed in this report, increasing the science, technology, and engineering components of STEM education to produce more engineers and computer programmers is difficult when raising reading and math scores assume such high priority, and thus crowd out other subjects. The same is true of other higher-order critical thinking and creativity required to forge productive workers and good citizens; attaching high stakes to

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tests that assess basic skills all but guarantees that more complex learning falls by the
guise.\textsuperscript{35}

The report’s authors wrote that market-oriented reforms are “no match for the complex,
poverty-related problems they seek to solve.” They explained that the reforms have harmed
students that have historically been marginalized in publics education.

It is students in under-resourced schools, who have lost literature and poetry to
vocabulary drills and seen their curricula stripped of art, music, and physical education to
make room for increased test preparation, who are most likely to see their schools
shuttered when their test scores do not rise quickly enough.

The Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago studied the
effects of school closures on displaced students. One of the underlying beliefs of market-based
reform is that test scores will spur competition among schools and that subsequent
under-enrollment and under-performance will justify school closures. Students in
under-performing schools will have the “choice” to attend higher-performing schools.
Researchers found that, of the schools closed in Chicago between 2001 and 2006, only 6
percent of displaced students were able to attend schools that had test scores in the top quartile.
In addition, researchers found that student’s test scores dropped with the announcement of
school closings and that the effects on their learning in subsequent years was neither negative
nor positive.\textsuperscript{36} In 2013, Chicago slated 54 schools for closure, the largest group of schools to be
shut down in recent history.

In the February 2012, distinguished education historian Diane Ravitch expressed her
indignation at New York State’s decision to release teachers’ value-added ratings by writing an
article titled \textit{How To Demoralize Teachers}:

No one will be a better teacher because of these actions. Some will leave this
disrespected profession—which is daily losing the trappings of professionalism, the
autonomy requisite to be considered a profession. Some will think twice about becoming
a teacher. And children will lose the good teachers, the confident teachers, the energetic
and creative teachers, they need.\textsuperscript{37}

Bolder Approach to Education. Retrieved February 21, 2014 from:}
\texttt{http://www.boldapproach.org/rhetoric-trumps-reality}

\textsuperscript{36} Torre, M. & Gwynne, J. (2013, October). When schools close: Effects on displaced students in Chicago
\texttt{http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/CCSRSchoolClosings-Final.pdf}

2014 from:} \texttt{http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/Bridging-Differences/2012/02/how_to_demoralize_teachers.html}
Diane Ravitch was one of 1,100 professors to sign an open letter to the New York State Board of Regents calling for an end to the state’s over reliance on high-stakes testing.

As lifelong educators and researchers, from across the State of New York, we strongly oppose New York State’s continued reliance on high stakes standardized testing in public schools as the primary criterion for assessing student achievement, evaluating teacher effectiveness, and determining school quality.\textsuperscript{38}

In October, 121 children’s book authors and illustrators sent a letter to President Obama expressing their concern over high-stakes testing. Among them, Maya Angelou, Judy Blume, and Jane Yolen:

We the undersigned children’s book authors and illustrators write to express our concern for our readers, their parents and teachers. We are alarmed at the negative impact of excessive school testing mandates, including your Administration’s own initiatives, on children’s love of reading and literature. Recent policy changes by your Administration have not lowered the stakes. On the contrary, requirements to evaluate teachers based on student test scores impose more standardized exams and crowd out exploration.\textsuperscript{39}

\textit{Education Doublespeak and the Marketing of Common Core Reforms}

We have included a few examples of the efforts of parents, teachers, principals, researchers, and authors to enter into a democratic debate on market-based reforms. Appointed education leaders who have traveled the revolving door of private foundations, charter school initiatives, and corporate consultancies, have stifled democratic debate by marketing their reforms with the same tenacity that they have used to divert public funds to the corporate vendors and monied circles that they owe their positions to. The marketing is grounded in doublespeak. Words like success, achievement, rigor, and 21st Century Learning are touted so often by reformers that their substance becomes obscured. In the paradigm of market-based reform, students’ achievement on for-profit bubble tests is the only metric for claiming success. The pathway to so-called “success” is so narrow, therefore, that policymakers, parents, teachers, and principals have been lulled into compliance.

Policymakers who invest in the data sheets of testing corporations are heralded as paving the way for “21st Century Learning.” Principals who organize their school’s curriculum around testing data will be labeled “bold school leaders” and escape sanctions. Teachers who implement pre-packaged test-centric curriculum and view children through the lens of testing data will keep their jobs. Parents who accept corporations as educational gatekeepers will

comply with testing to preserve their child’s chances of promotion or a desired school placement. In such a system, high-stakes tests become a deity of manufactured educational opportunity rather than a tool for fostering teaching, learning, and human development. It is a system dependent on compliance, measured predictability, and public tax dollars for private profit.

The Consequences of a School System That Devalues Teachers

We are acting on our conscience, built on years of experience teaching young people. In reaction to this position paper it is likely that some will characterize or choices as a betrayal of high standards, an endorsement of “watered-down” curricula, or cynically as an attempt to escape teacher evaluations and “accountability.” In a different national climate, the character and credibility of individuals who leveled those charges would be questioned. Regrettably, the denigration of teachers has become commonplace among proponents of market-based reforms, with little forethought as to the regrettable consequences that come to a school system that devalues its teachers. Teachers are motivated and guided daily by students, which is a type of accountability that is seldom understood by policymakers who have not devoted their careers to teaching. We are skilled curriculum developers and it is our ability to create curriculum that is standards based, yet responsive to our students, that distinguishes us as professionals.

Critics may view us as irresponsible for dismissing Common Core tests without proposing an “alternative” to take its place. Parents may ask, ‘But don’t we need a way to know how our students measure up?’ Historically, the use of standardized tests for the purpose of ranking and sorting students has acted to reproduce and normalize inequality rather than challenge it. Standardized testing depends on a reductionist logic that falsely attributes test scores to innate ability or merit on a “level playing field.” The claim that standardized tests can act as a tool or benchmark for addressing inequality contradicts its theoretical underpinnings and historical applications. Nicholas Lemann, Dean of Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, aptly stated, “Tests tend to reproduce, not upend, social hierarchies. Everybody is always looking for the test on which people from different races and classes do the same, but it doesn’t exist.”

Teachers assess students daily to inform instruction and curriculum design. Without assessment, teachers would be adrift in their relationships with students. There are numerous, more refined assessment tools and observation techniques at our disposal. Some schools use collectively designed Performance Based Assessment Tasks, portfolio-based assessments, roundtable presentations of student work to a panel of judges, or various long-term interdisciplinary assessments to measure students’ strengths, weaknesses, and growth. Schools that use these methods of assessment typically point to their flexibility, authenticity, real-world applicability, and to the high level of student and community buy-in and engagement they elicit as benefits. These types of assessment are particularly valuable in more accurately assessing English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and students with “test

anxiety.” It is through flexibility in assessment and our strong relationships with students that we come to know them as learners. The possibility for diverse assessment tools will not diminish with the exclusion of unrefined and misapplied for-profit Common Core tests. In the end, this is not a debate over whether or not students will be assessed, but rather whom policymakers trust with knowing students and planning for their learning. Policymakers can choose to outsource that responsibility to the inept data-factories of education corporations, or support teachers in assessing students in authentic ways and developing quality curricula. Teachers are by no means a panacea for the societal ills that we have outlined in this position paper, but when faced with a classroom of creative and inquisitive minds, one cannot help but feel hopeful that some measure of societal change is possible.

A Call to Preserve Public Education

We have observed a groundswell of teachers fighting to preserve the dignity of their profession from the damage done by market-based reforms. We now turn to you, Chancellor Carmen Fariña, to see what you are willing to stand for. We have observed a tendency on the part of school leaders and policymakers sympathetic to our position to decry an “obsession with high-stakes testing” yet accept for-profit testing as an inevitability of schooling. We find that position to be unsettling and counterproductive because it denies educators agency in shaping education policy. We are often cautioned to wait, that education fads come and go, and that the “pendulum” will swing the other way. We understand you to be a student of history and as such you know that it is people’s actions rather than the passage of time that brings about change. You were quoted as saying “Life is a series of tests in many ways,” and we believe that the most transformative of those tests will be the ones that test moral courage. We make it our profession to prepare students for those moments that will require them to think critically and take bold action. Maxine Greene defined freedom as “the capacity to surpass the given and look at things as if they could be otherwise.”41 We are asking you to critically evaluate the given and consider whether or not you will join us in seeing it otherwise.