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The Relentless Attack on Teachers: Andrew Hartman interviews Mark Naison

Mark Naison is a Professor of African-American Studies and History at Fordham University and Director of Fordham's Urban Studies Program. He is the author of three books: *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*; *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904-1984*; and *White Boy: A Memoir*. He regularly writes about the politics of education at his blog *With a Brooklyn Accent* (<http://withabrooklynaccent.blogspot.com>).

Andrew Hartman: How did you get involved in the politics of education reform? Your first book, *Communists in Harlem in the Depression*, an important contribution to the historiography of the left, includes a discussion of the communist teachers of the radical New York Teacher's Union, with great analysis of how class and race figured in the 1930s struggles over educational politics. Did such scholarly interests bring you to contemporary educational politics? Or something else?

Mark Naison: My interest in the politics of education reform came from two experiences. The first was doing community history projects in Bronx schools as result of the research initiative I currently direct, the Bronx African American History Project; the second was the experiences my wife, an elementary school principal in Brooklyn, has had with the methods used by the New York City Department of Education to evaluate schools and teachers, methods which she was convinced were as inaccurate as they were demoralizing, as well as the arrogant refusal of officials to give principals and teachers input on policy.

Ten years ago, I began an oral history project focusing on the African American experience in the Bronx, which had been largely left out of New York African American history of the Bronx. This project uncovered a rich legacy of community building and musical creativity that had never been written about, in Morrisania and Hunts Point, two neighborhoods that had received little scholarly attention for anything but crime, drugs, arson and urban decay. As we began to write articles and give lectures about our findings, people in Bronx schools heard about what we were doing and arranged for us to give lectures and presentations to social studies teachers all over the Bronx. There was so much excitement among teachers about incorporating this material in what they were teaching that I was hired to actually train the staffs of 13 different Bronx schools in how to do community history projects. Never have I had as exciting an experience bringing historical research to a popular audience. The teachers I worked with leaped upon the chance to get students excited about history and to get families and community members involved in projects ranging from films and photo displays, to plays, to food festivals, to displays of historical artifacts, to essay contests. The results of these two-month projects were daylong festivals involving parents and grandparents, local merchants, elected officials and leaders of community organizations. All this occurred six years ago. And I expected it to continue since it was so successful.



But then the New York City Department of Education began to institute a program of school ratings and school grades based largely on student test scores, with the goal of closing low performing schools, and the entire climate in the Bronx changed. All of a sudden, schools became so preoccupied with raising test scores that they could not spend two months on community history. Test prep was the only thing schools had time for anymore.

Worse yet, this policy change was accompanied by a relentless attack on teachers on the part of the Mayor and the school chancellor Joel Klein, echoed by the press, blaming bad teachers for low test scores in communities like the Bronx where large numbers of residents lived in poverty. Their portrait of teachers so contrasted with the scores of dedicated and creative teachers I had worked with in Bronx schools that I wrote a piece called: "In Defense of Public School Teachers," which went viral after I posted it on my blog. And I got so many emails from teachers thanking me that I decided I needed to continue speaking out on their behalf because they were being stigmatized publicly to such an extraordinary degree.

Then, simultaneously, I was hearing from my wife that the formulas that the New York City Department of Education were using to rate schools were so flawed that they totally defied common sense. That she was saying this, as principal of one of the highest performing schools in the city, got my attention. As did the fact that no one seemed to take her seriously when she told them the formulae they were using were flawed. And that was just school ratings. When the New York City Department of Education then began developing methods for rating individual teachers, they proved even more inaccurate than those used to rate schools, so much so that some of the best teachers in my wife's school had the lowest ratings and vice versa.

When you put these things all together, what you had was public demonization of teachers, and policies developed to allegedly root out incompetent teachers that were totally inaccurate, coupled with policy making at the highest level which erased teachers and principals voices, even when they came from the most successful people in the system.

The result was a policy disaster of the highest order and this was something I decided I had to fight.

AH: Would you summarize the objectives of education reform? What's at stake?

MN: I see the education reform movement as a strategy to reduce economic and racial inequality without redistributing wealth through taxation, which is the only way to do this effectively. Since it has been incredibly difficult to raise taxes on anyone, even the very wealthy, since Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, elected officials, foundation leaders and even some community leaders desperate to find a strategy to combat the growing marginalization of America's poor, and the shrinking of it's middle class, seized



on improving schools as the path of least resistance to fighting poverty since it could be done without spending more money. They started developing strategies to improve the performance of schools in poor neighborhoods without seeking additional funds, all of which focused removing incompetent and unmotivated teachers, and replacing them with a teaching force held up to high performance standards. And once you go down that path, everything else follows—to have accountability, you need reliable measurements, and for that you need data. And the way to generate data is through testing. So you need more tests, regularly imposed, and statistical measure to evaluate teaching on the results of those tests. And when you come upon failure, by those measures, you have to take action and the best action to take is close schools and fire teachers—and replace them with different kind of schools that offer less protection for teachers. You then have ideal conditions for improving schools—accountability, competition, and a teaching force expected to maintain high standards who will be replaced if it doesn't produce the expected results, which is to narrow the achievement gap between low income and high income students, and between Black and Latino students and White and Asian students

The logic of this position if your background is in business or politics, is well nigh irresistible. We want to make schools better, hold teachers accountable and remove them if they don't perform

However, there are two huge problems with this position. The first is that you are taking a short cut to reducing poverty and redistributing wealth with no track record anywhere in the world. If tax policy and wage compression concentrate wealth at the top, transforming schools will do little to counter those trends. It certainly has not done so in the United States. In the ten years since No Child Left behind was passed, the percentage of national income monopolized by the top 1 percent has increased markedly while wage levels for most people have remained stagnant or declined.

But secondly, there is huge collateral damage to reorganizing schools—among them, demoralizing the teaching force, transforming instruction into test prep, crowding out science, history, the arts, and exercise, and destabilizing communities by closing schools which have been important community institutions.

And what began as an idealistic, if somewhat misguided strategy to do something about growing poverty in a conservative nation has now become a political juggernaut which offers ambitious people an opportunity for career building and profiteering, be it in developing and imposing tests, creating formulas for rating teachers, or founding charter schools.

And when you link opportunism, idealism and wishful thinking, you have a well nigh irresistible combination that can only be slowed when it self destructs—through cheating scandals, bribery and theft, test protocols which promote parent revolts, and a complete failure to achieve promised results. In the meantime, the collateral damage will be



enormous.

AH: Education reformers like Teach for America (TFA) founder and president Wendy Kopp argue that we don't need to wait to solve political problems like economic inequality before fixing schools. They believe that by hiring the right kind of teachers, and by holding them accountable, even the least advantaged American children can be afforded a decent education. They sell this mission as the next civil rights movement. It's a convincing message to young idealists who want to do something tangible to improve the world upon graduating from college. What do you say to the young idealists? What is the best response to the high-minded rhetoric of the education reform movement?

MN: Kopp makes a very appealing argument. Why not try to improve schools first and then address ourselves to the more difficult issue that produce poverty and inequality? That position might make sense if those other factors remained static. But as unemployment rises, wages go down, homelessness increases and school budgets plummet as a result of a declining tax base, leading to rising class sizes, any attempt to critically evaluate the quality of teachers and schools in neighborhoods experiencing such conditions is inevitably skewed by the extraordinary stress placed on students, stress the schools experiencing budget cuts are not prepared to alleviate. This makes honest evaluation of what is going on in schools in poor and working class neighborhoods virtually impossible to do. And the result is to resort to a short cut that factors out these real world forces—using student test scores alone to evaluate schools and teachers. Every single one of the Reform organizations has ended up supporting this using a facile no excuses rhetoric. The results is that the Reform movement ends up making schools in poor areas worse in the following ways:

1. It leads to closing of schools which have historically been important community institutions and which are still effective in nurturing and supporting students under difficult conditions.
2. It leads to schools that want to avoid being closed to engage in massive systematic cheating on standardized tests.
3. It leads to the charter schools created by the Reformers to either keep out or push out students who don't test well—special needs students, ELL students, students living in foster care or shelters.

To summarize, trying to improve schools alone in poor neighborhoods while poverty worsens leads to a form of educational triage where you create a few schools which appear to succeed because they hand pick their students, while the rest flounder and keep failing thus being subject to closure

The other portion of the equation we need to look at is what kind of pedagogy is promoted by this “no excuses” approach to the problems of schools in poor and working class



neighborhoods. Overwhelmingly, the Reformers including Teach for America, promote a pedagogy of test prep since test results and graduation rates are chosen as the sole indicators of whether schools work. The results are curricula devoid of art, music, science, history, and sometimes even of opportunity for exercise, accompanied by rigid discipline. Mentoring disappears, especially since TFA has created a revolving door model of the inner city teacher based on its two-year commitment. And forget community building and community organizing. The school becomes a place where student learn to pass tests, with those who can't being pushed to the margins.

To put it bluntly, the Kopp model has been tried, and the model has failed. There is no evidence that low- and moderate-income students in the country are getting a better education, or are faring better in the economy than they did ten years ago. Wages continue to go down. Wealth continues to funnel upward.

Testing in schools will not reverse this.

AH: We both agree that the Education Reform movement has failed, and is in fact making things much worse. What can be done to stop it?

MN: There is no simple way to stop School Reform. I liken it to the Vietnam War, a bi-partisan initiative based on false assumptions that took ten years to stop, and destroyed countless lives in the process. School Reform will ultimately self-destruct in the following ways. First, through cheating scandals, and examples of financial corruption that attract media attention. This has already started to happen, as with the *Frontline* program about Michelle Rhee's tenure as DC School Chancellor. Secondly, through a revolt, by teachers and principals, against using test scores as the basis of teacher evaluation. This has happened in New York State through the NY principals' initiative, and is part of what prompted the Chicago teachers' strike. Third, a revolt by neighborhood leaders, along with parents, teachers and students against schools closings, based largely on test cores and graduation rates, which destabilize neighborhoods by undermining institutions that served several generations of residents. Fourth, a revolt by parents of special needs and ELL students whose children are being excluded from the Reform sponsored charter schools and by parents of those students in middle class districts who are being forced to take standardized tests which are developmentally inappropriate for them. This revolt is particularly important because it could lead to lawsuits that could bankrupt school districts that pursue these policies. And fifth, and probably most significantly, a revolt by parents in middle class communities whose children are starting to hate school because they are being deluged with tests, and who are being asked to sacrifice school trips and arts and music and gym to prepare for tests. All of these different protests will reinforce once another and gradually persuade media figures and politicians to withdraw their support from the Reform juggernaut. We are three or four years away from all of these movements flipping the script and putting Reformers on the defensive, but it is only a matter of time before the Emperor's clothes come off.



AH: On the assumption that American education is far from perfect, what policies for educational reform do you support, in addition to tax policies that would reverse the upward wealth redistribution the nation has experienced since the 1980s?

I have a very different vision of what public schools should do in our society. My vision involves making schools centers of community revitalization where young people's curiosity and creativity are nurtured, where student differences are recognized and respected, where the physical and emotional health of children are promoted, where teachers have long careers, and where parents and community members are welcome.

I think you begin with creating a child friendly environment. That means sharply reducing the number of tests, leaving ample room for exercise and play, giving primacy to the arts, and having subjects, when possible, incorporate hands on learning and project-based activity. I would also like as many schools as possible to grow and prepare food (with indoor and outdoor farms) and link that to science instruction; have students participate in community improvement initiatives, and become involved in mentoring younger students. As much as possible, I would like learning to be cooperative rather than competitive and extend that to the staff—a process that would mean removing the threat of school closings and have evaluation done by peers rather than consultants.

I would also like to see a huge investment in vocation and technical education to prepare students for decent paying jobs in traditional areas like repair of automobiles and appliances as well as emerging areas like solar and wind energy. Here, we can learn a great deal from how Germany and other Northern European countries do this.

Additionally, I would try to create a climate where talented people enter teaching as a lifetime career, which involves treating teachers with respect, giving them input into all decisions affecting their professional lives, including at the level of education policy.

As Velvet Ross of the Bronx suggests, instead of Teach for America, we need a “Teach in My Hood” which identifies people in low income and working class communities, especially in communities of color, who want to pursue careers as public school teachers and gives them first rate training including mentoring from master teachers. This sure beats bringing Muffy and Buffy to the inner city for a two-year stint!

And in communities which suffer the effects of poverty, I would turn schools into 24-hour community centers which serve neighborhood residents as well as students, and train residents of those communities to run programs in the schools, whether they are after school sports, arts and computer programs, or school based farms. I would also actively recruit the teaching staff for those schools from people who live in those communities, or communities like them and incorporate the culture and history of the people in those neighborhoods into school curricula



That's my plan!

AH: This is a wonderful plan. Does anything give you hope that such a vision might become reality? Perhaps, in this vein, you might comment on the Chicago Teachers Union, which seems to be the antithesis of Education Reform.

MN: I think in the short run—the next five years—there is little chance that a vision like mine will guide policy on a national or state level (there are many schools around the country doing much of what I suggest—for example, “portfolio schools” in New York State—but they are doing so through hard won exemptions from current policy initiatives). However within ten years, I think the Education Reform Juggernaut will completely self destruct and the pendulum will swing, whether back, forwards or sideways, towards schools as centers of community building and creativity

We see signs of self destruction everywhere: in the Chicago Teachers Strike, where teachers and parents united against school closings, preference toward charter schools, and starving of existing public school budgets for arts, libraries and sports; in the unanimous refusal of teachers at Garfield High School in Seattle to administer state mandated math and reading tests which they thought were a waste of time and money; in the New York principals petition against evaluation of individual teachers based on student test scores, which gathered thousands of signatures; and in the movement of parents all over the nation—sparked by United Opt Out—to get exemptions for their children from standardized tests.

These initiatives will soon be followed by class action suits against discriminatory application of standardized tests to special needs and ELL students; to exclusion of such students from publicly favored charter schools; and quite possible by parents of students, not in those categories, who feel excessive testing threatens the mental and physical well being of their children.

I also think there will be a rising outcry by health professionals against the damaging impact of test policies, which crowd out gym, recess, play and after school programs from the school day, especially in neighborhoods which already suffer from child obesity issues as well as a variety of stress related mental health problems. There will also be significant pressure on schools, as climate change worsens, to incorporate practices built around the encouragement of sustainability, whether through the creation of indoor and outdoor school farms, or the creation of new technical high schools that train young people for careers in organic agriculture and renewable energy.

It is only a matter of time before current reform test initiatives will be perceived and acted upon by stakeholders as a form of publicly mandated child abuse that are a threat to public health as well as teaching and learning. And when that happens, many of the proposals I put on the table will be implemented.