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## Testing Times: A School Case Study

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### Abstract

A highly successful, innovative and creative alternative to traditional education is confronted by the demands of contemporary standardized accountability. The account here is a chronicle of the resistance of a particular school, the Durant School, to the global changes that would destroy its local ecology—a school whose fight against the imposition of state standards and mandated tests has been a fight to preserve its integrity, its mission, and its autonomy.

Picture this: a public urban high school conceived in the late 1960s as an alternative to the traditional education and hierarchical structure of most city schools. A

school that has not only upheld this unique educational and social vision through its 30-year history, but is deemed successful in terms of its high attendance and college acceptance rates, as well as its low dropout and suspension figures. A school whose 200 students—African-American, White, Latino/a, and Asian-American—choose to enroll there because of this unique vision and high success, and whose teachers choose to work there because they know the school affords them the freedom and respect to realize their innovative educational beliefs. A school that is frequently described by teachers, students, and parents alike as a community, a family even, due to its non-hierarchical structures and close, supportive relationships.

Moreover, these judgments of success are not made only by those involved in this school. The city's mayor recently commented on the school's achievements in a letter to the state education commissioner, noting that the school's "success rate in graduating at-risk students is approximately 20 percent higher than the City School District's average rate." In addition, the school "boasts some of the District's highest attendance rates, highest SAT scores, lowest suspension rates, and lowest dropout rates." The mayor concluded that this school's "non-traditional, yet rigorous process for demanding accountability and assessing knowledge serves its students well." (Note 1) This then is a school that has not only kept its unique vision alive, it has also passed the tests of a school's success that have been set over its thirty years.

Yet, what happens when this school, an oasis of non-traditional practices, is confronted in this current era of educational accountability by an entirely different vision of what a successful school should be? A vision embodied in newly mandated state standards and standardized tests? A vision that, in fact, parallels the over-standardized, over-tested types of schools which the school's original founders turned their backs on 30 years ago in their search for a successful alternative? One would common-sensically expect that any form of governance, state or local, would not change "a winning team," but in the new forms of governance, educational success does not exempt schools from systematic new forms of interference.

In the new regimes of governance in education, control of education is passing from the trusted coalitions of teachers, students and community that have been painstakingly developed in schools such as this. In a more general sense, control is passing from internal educational agents and student and parental communities towards external forces representing a different range of interests. (Note 2) Lobbying efforts by corporations and industrial interests impinge hugely on the judgments of politicians and state education commissioners. These forces drive educational governance in wholly new directions. New patterns of external and symbolic control typically focus on testing, transparency, and accountability. Whilst understandable in principle, in reality such methods often collide with the delicately constructed ecology of school life. As such globalization wreaks environmental havoc in the world generally, so, too, can its specific effects in schools grievously damage the local ecology of an educational environment.

This account, then, is a chronicle of the resistance of a particular school, the Durant School, to just those global changes that would destroy its local ecology—a school whose fight against the imposition of state standards and mandated tests has been a fight to preserve its integrity, its mission, and its autonomy. In other words, it has been a fight both to survive and to defend a different, many would say more humane, vision of schooling.

Before we examine this school more closely, it is important to step back a moment and briefly contemplate a key argument for the standards movement: that the definition and prescription of higher standards will improve our failing schools. Though many dispute the notion that state-mandated curricula imposed in a top-down fashion

and policed through the use of high-stakes, standardized exams will improve schools, we need to ask different questions. What will the standards movement do to our *successful* schools? Why must they comply with decrees and edicts pertaining to the content of their curricula when their graduates have a proven record of success in both college and the workplace? Why must their students submit to a battery of paper and pencil exams that supposedly demonstrate academic competency when this competency is already demonstrated by their post-graduation performances, let alone their classroom achievement? [And, we might add, why should the focus be only on strictly academic intelligence when more and more business gurus—the very people often influential in the standards movement—are stressing the crucial importance of social and emotional intelligence?]

The reply from standards advocates has been that if a school is already successful, then the standards and their accompanying tests should amount to nothing more than a few hours out of a student's life to sit for the requisite state exams that she/he will undoubtedly pass if the school is, indeed, of high quality. Such a response starkly exposes the narrow and limited perspective of what many standards advocates believe education is all about: a circumscribed set of skills and myriad facts that can be regurgitated onto a paper and pencil exam in a pressurized testing environment. It is this perspective that the non-traditional Durant School has been fighting in recent months. Not surprisingly, since the school was set up deliberately to alleviate problems generated by a previous era of educational thinking of precisely this kind.

Located in a small, industrial city in the northeast section of the US, the Durant School first faced the possibility of new state standardized exams in 1996. It was in April that year that the state's commissioner of education announced the adoption of a series of five standardized exams—in five different content areas—to measure the attainment of the state's new higher standards by high school students. The passage of all five exams would be mandatory for graduation, and no public high school student would be exempt. Though the exams would be gradually phased in so as to give teachers and students time to prepare, the Durant School was acutely aware of the immediate, and deleterious, impact of these mandates on its program. Specifically, in order to prepare its students for these exams, the school would have to begin both providing courses that specifically addressed the content of these new state standards and preparing students to take standardized exams. Both these practices are antithetical to the school's philosophy that students should have opportunities to learn in-depth in areas of their own interest, and that this learning is best demonstrated through presentations, portfolios, and long-term projects, or in other words, through performance-based assessments. In an attempt to preserve its integrity, an exemption from the state mandates was imperative.

In the summer of 1997, the Durant School applied for a variance from the state exams, maintaining that it upheld and even surpassed the broad state standards. [It is important to note that there are two sets of standards at play in this struggle—the broad state learning standards that address the development of cognitive skills, and the narrow content standards for the different subject areas.] The school asked that instead of exams, it be allowed to continue to evaluate the students' attainment of the broad learning standards through its own performance-based assessments, especially as these very same assessments had recently been publicly commended by the state as a model for high schools to emulate. To its great shock, the state denied the request, maintaining that any alternative assessments to the state exams had to be externally developed; individual schools' assessments could no longer be trusted to ensure high standards. This rejection illustrates just how dramatically the educational and ideological climate has been transformed in the past decade. Performance-based assessments and local control

have been knocked from the vanguard, usurped by standardized tests with their scientific claims of "objective" reliability and validity, delivered by bureaucrats from "on-high." However, the Durant School did not surrender its principles so easily: the fight had only just begun.

Throughout the 1997-1998 school year, the principal of the Durant School maintained contact and eventually joined forces with a group of non-traditional high schools in the state, most of which are located together in another city, nearly 400 miles away. These schools were also fighting the state exam mandates, maintaining that their performance-based assessments not only upheld their missions and programs, but were also valid measures of the broad state standards. This union of schools, which now included the Durant School, decided to apply for a group waiver from the exams. However, rather than rushing forward with the request, they thought it best to take their time and build as strong a case for their alternative assessments as they could.

While this group effort was underway, the Durant School, cautious that the state might turn down the group waiver as well, began to examine other possible strategies to circumvent the testing mandates. Charter schools was one idea, and in the fall of 1998, during their biweekly school based planning team meetings, staff, students, and parents discussed together this possibility as a way to preserve the Durant School's autonomy. Though the idea was appealing to some, there was also strong philosophical opposition to such a move, especially regarding the siphoning of public school funds for these schools and their use by the religious right. Later, when it was discovered that charter school students would still be required to pass the state exams to graduate, the idea became moot. During this same period, there was also talk about granting GEDs in lieu of state diplomas. Yet, again, there were grave concerns, especially that such a move would bar future education or job opportunities to Durant School graduates and be publicly perceived as a retreat from quality learning.

While the development of internal strategies for maintaining the school's autonomy and integrity was crucial, the school realized that these strategies alone were not enough, that a public relations campaign was also essential in a successful fight against the state standards mandates. Therefore, as the internal strategies were discussed and debated in the weekly staff and biweekly school based planning team meetings, the Durant School began to pursue several avenues of gaining public support for the school, and consequently, its request for a variance from the state exams. Heeding the advice of a sympathetic member of the city's board of education, the principal and staff enlisted parents, a.k.a. "voters," as lobbyists to advocate for the school. A special meeting was convened in November 1998 for staff to talk with a group of responsive parents about the threat these exams posed to their children's education. These parents in turn offered to organize and attend meetings with members of the board of education and the schools' superintendent to enlist their support. Also, the school's community board—a board consisting of staff, parents, students, and community supporters of the Durant School—decided to organize and sponsor a local conference, open to the public, on the effects of the state exams on student learning.

Meanwhile, the school also turned to the media, especially the local daily newspaper, to publicize its plight. The principal's guest editorial on the negative effects of the state exams on the Durant School was published in mid-November, followed by an in-depth article on the school a few days later. When the same newspaper then published its own editorial claiming that the school could both maintain its program *and* prepare its students for the state exams, an English teacher in the school swiftly responded. In his published letter, he chastised the editorial board for its lack of evidence that the school could do both, indicating that it had not adequately researched

the issue. Aside from the daily newspaper, the school also turned to a local radio station for public outreach. Soon the principal, a parent, and a psychology professor from a local university [and a Durant School Community Board member] appeared together on a talk show to discuss the testing mandates and their effects on learning.

It was also in November 1998 that a math teacher suggested during a school based planning team meeting that the school contact state legislators in an effort to gain their support. His reasoning was that even though the commissioner of education and his board had set the state exam policy, the legislators were the ones in charge of implementation. Following this suggestion, staff, parents, students, alumni, and Community Board members began to write letters to local state legislators, asking for support of the variance. The school also began to solicit the support of business leaders who could, hopefully, influence the state politicians and education leaders.

The public relations campaign continued to gain steam through the winter of 1999. The principal devoted several hours each day drumming up support for the variance request, arranging meetings with political, business, and state education leaders, and seeking public opportunities to spread the word of the harmful effects of the standards mandates on the school. Two parents in particular consistently worked on these efforts with him; the supportive school board member offered strategic advice; and various staff, students, parents, alumni, and Community Board members also volunteered. Staff and school based planning meetings, as well, were filled with regular discussions on the efforts to secure the variance from the state tests. The fight had gained a preeminent position in the school's day-to-day operations, and though staff expressed much stress as a result, they were unwilling to capitulate to the standards mandates.

In February the community board-sponsored conference on the state standards and testing was held. Approximately 100 persons heard Monty Neill, the executive director of the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, give an impassioned keynote address, and lively debate among local and state educators ensued throughout the evening. This event, covered by local television, radio, and newspaper media, was coincidentally followed the next day by a regional hearing on the standards, sponsored by the state education department. Several members of the Durant School community testified, and according to the principal, the students' personal stories of their educational experiences had a profound effect on one member of the commissioner's board, who publicly stated afterwards that she would support a waiver for the school. Buoyed by these small steps, the school pressed on, and more meetings were held with political and educational leaders throughout the spring. Even when support was not secured, the principal was pleased that at least the standards and testing mandates had been raised publicly as an issue that merited deep critical consideration, and that the Durant School had put the word out.

By June 1999 significant local support for a variance had been attained. The superintendent of the city schools, assured that the alternative assessments in the group waiver were, in fact, aligned with the broad state learning standards, had quietly signed on. The board of education, in turn, passed a resolution of support for the waiver, and even the editorial board of the daily newspaper changed its position and came out in favor of a variance for alternative schools. A number of local legislators had responded to the school's requests for support with letters to the education commissioner, asking him to grant the school a variance as well. There was a greater sense of optimism that a variance really was within reach, and that the school's integrity could be preserved.

It was also in June that the Durant School began to lobby the legislative chairs of the joint state education committee, an association that proved especially

advantageous in the coming months. The principal had always maintained that if the state education department and the education commissioner did not approve a variance, then special legislation was another possibility. Thus, when the joint legislative education committee announced a June hearing in the state capital to examine the impact of the standards mandates and testing on schools, the principal welcomed the opportunity to make the case for the waiver and gain support for the Durant School's plight. After some preliminary strategy meetings in the weeks before the hearing, about a dozen Durant School representatives—students, staff, parents, Community Board members, and alumni—traveled over 200 miles by rented van to testify. Several other representatives from the alliance of schools seeking the group variance testified as well; and by the day's end, the committee chairs expressed sympathy for the variance request, especially as the students' testimonies to these schools' positive effects on their lives had been, in the chairs' opinion, so persuasive.

Summer 1999, though slower-paced, did see two significant developments in the fight: the mayor wrote a letter to the education commissioner in support of the variance, and a majority of the local legislators signed a pro-variance petition, also addressed to the commissioner. However, as the new school year commenced in September, the cautious optimism in the school began to wane. A ruling on the group variance, now formally submitted, remained pending, and teachers and students expressed deep feelings of anxiety and frustration as they awaited a decision. The education commissioner, they observed, seemed more intransigent than ever as he adamantly, and frequently, proclaimed in the media that there would be no retreat from the state standards—an ominous sign, they believed, for the variance. This apprehension only increased as the missives from the state education department consistently emphasized that the only viable alternative assessments to the state exams would be other externally developed tests. Performance-based assessments, it seemed, were not even considered an option. Despite this pessimism, the Community Board did sponsor another conference at the school on the effects of the standards mandates in an attempt to educate, and galvanize, the public. However, turnout was poor, and several in the Durant School community interpreted this low attendance as an indication that the standards had already been accepted as a *fait accompli*. They also despaired any prospect of a statewide opposition movement. Still, a letter writing campaign, organized by a parent, was launched to intensify the pressure on political and educational leaders, and the school continued to wait anxiously for an official ruling on the variance.

It was during this bleak period that a group of Durant School students, disgusted by the fact-filled, rote learning of their newly mandated history class, decided to act. As second-year students they had previously experienced the pleasure of the school's learner-centered classes, and they were outraged by the difference in this class, especially as it was instigated by the state standards. When the school sent representatives to speak at a regional joint legislative education committee hearing, this time only 100 miles away, about 20 students voluntarily attended, either to testify or show support. Again, the committee was deeply impressed by the students' spirit and pride in their school, and a legislative aide privately predicted that the waiver would be granted. This development, combined with reports that other students from the alliance of schools had also made a strong impression at their regional hearing, helped re-energize the fight. In addition, the staff began to work monthly with a volunteer business consultant on ways to focus their energy in fighting the mandates and gaining support for the variance.

In December 1999 the state's official response to the variance request began to take shape as the Assessment Panel of the State Education Department granted the

alliance of schools a hearing in which to present their assessments. The alliance, in turn, solicited six nationally-known educational leaders, and friends of the alliance schools, to make the presentation. Not only did the alliance believe that these leaders, who also served on the alliance's performance assessment review board, would present a strong and convincing case, they also believed, according to the Durant School principal, that their prestige would lend political weight to the variance request. The night before the hearing, the six leaders gathered with several representatives from the alliance schools to discuss strategy and outline the presentation. At the two-hour hearing the following day, the six argued the case for the variance, answered questions from the committee, and defended the quality of the alliance's system of assessment. When the hearing concluded, a press conference, arranged by the alliance, was held in which the presenters attested to the urgent need for the variance.

That same day, the state's Assessment Panel issued its recommendation to the education commissioner: only a partial variance be granted, limited to the schools covered by a previous variance from state exams [this limitation excluded the Durant School], and good for only one year. When this recommendation was made known, the Durant School immediately intensified its campaign. The principal and several parents implored the school community to call and write letters to the legislative education committee members, urging them to request a full variance for the school from the commissioner. The community responded with a flurry of activity. The alliance, in turn, scheduled meetings with the education committee chairs to ask them to lobby the commissioner for the full variance as well. Finally, the day of reckoning arrived at the end of January 2000. The commissioner, following most of the panel's recommendations, issued a partial variance through the 2000-2001 school year, limited to the alliance schools in the previous variance. However, he did approve an extension of the variance to any remaining alliance schools that could demonstrate they had met the criteria of the alliance. This extension provision kept the Durant School's hopes alive, as they were certain of having already met all the criteria. By March, after the school had submitted proper documentation, the commissioner ruled that the Durant School was also covered under the temporary waiver. Significantly, the daily newspaper reported the story on the same day as it published an in- depth feature article on the Durant School in its series on the city schools, an article that had been actively solicited by the principal.

As of March 2000, the partial variance is only a partial victory. Keeping in mind that the five exams are being gradually phased in, this year's seniors are exempt from their only required exam, specifically English Language Arts. This year's juniors, however, must take, and pass, the English Language Arts exam to graduate, though they are exempt from the requisite state math exam, the second exam to be phased in. The current sophomores and freshmen have no exemptions – they must pass four and five exams, respectively, in English language arts, math, world history, American history, and science, as all five mandated exams will be required of the Class of 2003.

Despite the commissioner's ruling, the fight is not over. The Durant School, both alone and with the alliance, continues to devise strategy, lobby for supporters, and struggle to attain a full and complete variance. The activist spirit in which this school was created is alive and well, and it offers hope, 30 years later. In particular, it offers a model of how a socio-political process of advocacy and campaigning can turn the juggernaut of external forces in ways that benefit the educational endeavor. For, contrary to the position of the standards movement proponents, educational success, as epitomized by this school, is indeed attainable through the efforts of internal agents—coalitions of teachers, students, and parents. These are the only agents who can

truly know a particular school, thus possess the insight to determine what makes it "succeed" in the most profound sense of the word, and not as a simplistic reduction to a standardized test score.

## Notes

1. Mayor's letter to State Education Commissioner, June 28, 1999.
2. Goodson, I. (Forthcoming) Social Histories of Educational Change Theory in *The International Journal of Educational Change*.

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