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Schniedewind, Nancy & Sapon-Shevin, Mara. (2012). *Educational Courage: Resisting the Ambush of Public Education*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

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Reviewed by Katy Swalwell  
George Mason University

In 1995, the first edition of the now classic *Democratic Schools* (Apple & Beane, 1995) powerfully documented the challenging and often messy work of educators resisting neoliberal reforms and the privatization of public education. The recently published *Educational Courage: Resisting the Ambush of Public Education* has a similar mission: to inspire “those who value public education” by telling “the stories of educators, parents, students, and community members who are individually and collectively fighting for public education that affirms young people and works for the common good” (p. xxi). As the widely reprinted *Democratic Schools* has demonstrated, such a compilation of voices from the front can be quite powerful; unfortunately, a lack of thorough synthesis linking the stories together, the inclusion of accounts that

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are redundant or only loosely connected to the book's themes, and the editors' reliance on rhetoric rather than evidence-based reasoning ultimately undermines the potential impact of this volume.

To be sure, there are many chapters that will no doubt inspire those working to build democratic schools and communities and struggle against neoliberal reforms. These include several additional essays available on the *Educational Courage* website at [www.beacon.org/educationalcourage](http://www.beacon.org/educationalcourage), though the editors provide no explanation as to why they did not include these stories in the print edition. Parents, students, administrators, and teachers are the primary contributors to this volume, many of whom self-identify as "ordinary" or "regular" people who may not have always thought themselves capable of resistance, a message that will certainly resonate with many readers. The best of their stories describe in detail crucial turning point events that moved them to organize and resist in creative ways - with varying degrees of success.

There are reflections on battles lost like teacher Nate Walker's resignation from a Detroit charter school that had become consumed by market-based reforms. Another describes the unlikely collaboration between an English professor and a state commissioner of education in Nebraska who resigned when the state legislature replaced their relatively successful teacher-led assessment system with state exams. There are also tales of battles won, like teacher Sam Coleman's staff memo that helped to galvanize his peers against merit pay at their New York City school or the work of a coalition of educators and activists in Milwaukee to oppose mayoral takeover of the city's public schools. In another, a member of the "Curie 12" reflects on the role this group of teachers played in abolishing the Chicago Academic Standards Examination. There are also stories with less clear outcomes, including an account of "el niño rebelde," the fifth grade son of the author, who stood alone in his refusal to take the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills but inspired teachers and school leaders to alter their practices in the process. In another, student Latricia Wilson tells of her lawsuit that, though dismissed, exposed the unfairly high stakes of Tennessee's high school graduation exam. Lastly, there are stories of important ongoing battles with uncertain futures

like a chapter by Curtis Acosta, one of the educators fighting to defend the Mexican American/Raza Studies Department in Tucson Unified School District.

Including voices like these that are rarely heard in academic or policy circles is an important and welcomed contribution to the field. The editors of this volume, however, have neglected their responsibility to link these firsthand accounts to the robust evidence that public education is indeed being ambushed, research that could be a valuable tool for parents' and teachers' activism (e.g. Anyon, 2005; Apple, 2006; Au, 2009; Lipman, 2011; Ravitch, 2010; Watkins, 2011). For example, the authors claim in the introduction that, "Our educational system is being privatized and, in the process, our democracy is being threatened" (p.xxii) without any further explanation or evidence as to how and why this is happening. The first chapter, "A Short History of the Ambush of Public Education," would have been an appropriate place to do so, yet it traces the evolution of neoliberal reforms and their consequences merely in the broadest of strokes without any nuanced analysis or evidence-based explanations. The lack of research-based reasoning results in a chapter that reads as more editorial than empirical. Rather than providing insightful analysis of our current context, this kind of rhetoric risks being quickly dismissed by ideological opponents or blindly adhered to by ideological acolytes.

In addition to this lack of depth in the introduction to the book, the editors' introductions for each section do little to clarify why certain stories have been bundled together or why each of them has been included, particularly those that are similar to other accounts or have been written by contributors of multiple chapters. Neither do the editors sufficiently tease apart any themes or broader significance weaving through the stories, though a final chapter offers a handful of useful strategies for practitioners. It is also unclear what political commitments link these stories together; while ideological diversity may be an important strategic organizing principle for a book such as this, nowhere is that explained or made explicit.

The fundamental idea is that the contributions comprising this kind of book are to function as what Apple (2012) calls "critical secretaries" who document stories of

resistance to neoliberal reforms. This has been and continues to be a vitally important task of scholar activists who are committed to democratic education. Yet good critical secretaries do not merely bind random stories together; they carefully select, synthesize, and contextualize accounts and link them to rich bodies of evidence. In this regard, the editors of this volume sorely disappoint. Individual chapters, however, are worth the price of admission and will provide inspiration to parents, teachers, teacher educators, scholars, policymakers, students, and administrators who need a dose of educational courage in their resistance against the very real and dangerous ambush of public education.

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## About the Reviewer

Katy Swalwell PhD is an assistant professor at George Mason University focusing on the relationship between social justice and democratic education. Her most recent publication is *Educating Activist Allies: Social Justice Pedagogy with the Suburban and Urban Elite* (Routledge,

2012). She is currently analyzing the 2011 Wisconsin Uprising as a case study to explore the relationship between teacher activism and controversial issues in social studies classrooms.

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### Editors

David J. Blacker

[blacker@edrev.info](mailto:blacker@edrev.info)

Gustavo Fischman

[fischman@edrev.info](mailto:fischman@edrev.info)

Melissa Cast-Brede

[cast-brede@edrev.info](mailto:cast-brede@edrev.info)

Gene V Glass

[glass@edrev.info](mailto:glass@edrev.info)

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