



August 31, 2016

ISSN 1094-5296

Hagopian, J. (Ed.). (2014). *More than a score: The new uprising against high-stakes testing*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.

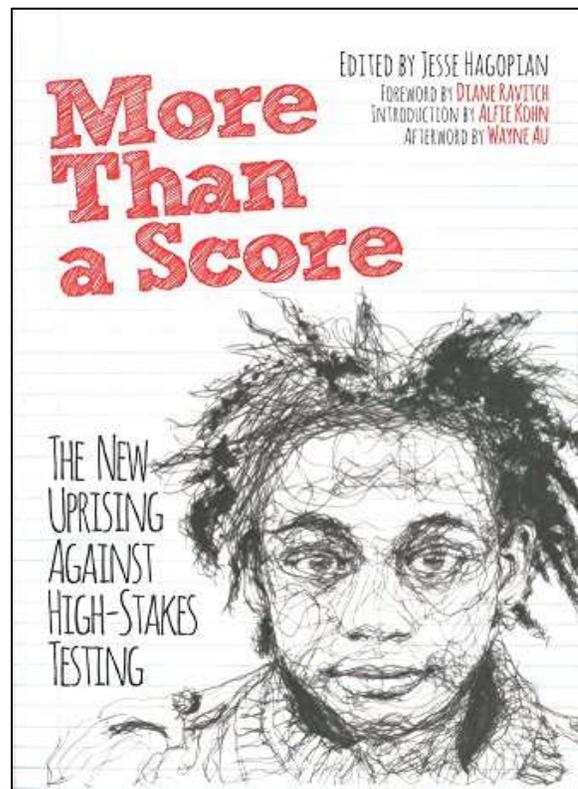
Pp. xiii+ 322

ISBN: 978-1-60846-392-3

**Reviewed by Audrey A. Fisch**  
**New Jersey City University**  
**United States**

Jesse Hagopian's *More Than a Score: The New Uprising Against High-Stakes Testing* is a compelling contribution to the national revolt against standardized testing, particularly the opt-out campaign. Together with a foreword by Diane Ravitch and an introduction by Alfie Kohn, the volume offers 27 interviews and essays by teachers, parents, parent activists, administrators, advocates, and students and former students (including some wonderful student-authored poetry). The importance and power of organization and support is the focus of the volume. Readers feeling disenfranchised, disempowered, or isolated by the test-centered environment in education will find allies, stories, and advice in the pages of *More Than a Score*.

Amid all the noise about testing today, Carol Burris, a distinguished New York principal, educator and writer, reminds us, in one of the strongest essays in the volume, about the purpose of assessment. Burris writes, we need assessments that “inform curriculum, that identify places where kids still need to learn and grow, and that also give an accurate reading of what it is that the child is able to



do” (p. 276). Burriss contrasts assessments designed to “sort” (p. 269) students, comparing one student to another, with those used “to inform instruction, ... modify curriculum, and ... identify the kids who really needed help” (p. 270). In the latter category, Burriss highlights the Regents exams and the International Baccalaureate exams, as opposed to those in the former, the standardized, norm-referenced SATs and many of the state and Common Core-style exams. Burriss explains that in New York, prior to 2010, teachers could see the standardized tests, which made them fundamentally productive in identifying “what kids were not understanding” (p. 276). After 2010, instructors were denied this ability; everything became “hidden and closed” (p. 276), and the tests lost their instructional power. More broadly, educators in New York and elsewhere have repeatedly been promised that new assessments will be timely and transparent, so they can be used to help students who are struggling. The reality, however, despite the move to electronic tests and promises of efficiency, is that scores arrive late, data is obscure or limited, and teachers, parents, and students are often left in the dark. As Burriss insists, we need to return to the fundamental purpose of assessment: “to help the child grow and to make us better teachers” (p. 276).

Beyond the question of how a test is used (to sort or to inform, as it were), Burriss also stresses the importance of fairness and validity in assessment. Jesse Hagopian includes in the volume striking examples of problems: one math teacher “first realized the MAP was off course when he looked over the shoulder of one of his ninth-grade algebra students and saw a geometry question” (35). An interview with Mary Cathryn Ricker, president of the St. Paul Federation of Teachers and executive vice president of the American Federation of Teachers, cites a young girl’s reaction to a reading passage about a Native American powwow on the

Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment that demeaned her culture.

Beyond these discouraging stories about unfairness and the shift away from an instructional focus, the volume focuses on the relationship between these tests and a corporate testing culture. As Texas school superintendent John Kuhn notes in his contribution to the volume, we now inhabit a world in which test cut scores are “arbitrarily set by politically appointed officials” (p. 246) while information about the content of the tests is controlled and kept secret so that the multinational corporations that develop the tests can “juice their profit margins by reusing old test items” (p. 246). According to Kuhn, “convoluted and wrong-headed policies” (p. 246) are the problem, not the tests themselves. The move away from tests as instructional tools has been engineered by “people who really don’t know what they are doing” (p. 246) and whose purpose is “political” (p. 247) more than pedagogical. Many of the contributors to this volume share Kuhn’s pessimism about the broader political agenda underwriting the current climate of testing. As Diane Ravitch writes in the Foreword, “This is a dark and puzzling time in American education .... People who call themselves ‘reformers’ seek to ... privatize public schools, to eliminate collective bargaining, and to change the nature of the teaching profession” (p. xi). New York parent Dao X. Tran, for example, writes, “If supporting our children’s learning had been the actual purpose of the Measures of Student Learning (MOSL) tests [used in New York] and they were developed by educators, I and other parents might not have been so up in arms. As it turns out, these tests were not about our children’s learning at all. They were in fact about ranking and sorting their teachers” (p. 215).

For Tran, Burriss, and others in the volume, we need to return our focus to the fundamental social inequality that underlines educational disparities. Burriss calls on reformers to acknowledge the role of poverty

in achievement gaps and to turn our attention instead on the opportunity gap. This sentiment is echoed in an essay by Cauldierre McKay, Aaron Regunberg, and Tim Shea, members of the Providence Student Union, a youth-led student organizing union in Rhode Island, who insist that testing obscures issues of equity and how “high-stakes testing punishes individuals – youth! – for systemic failures” (p. 136). The authors bemoan the fact that students are labeled as “too dumb” or teachers as “too lazy” while the existence of “crumbling, underfunded schools” (p. 136) and systemic underfunding of public education goes unnoticed and unaddressed. Malcolm London, a student, writes one of several poignant student-authored poems underscoring how disconnected this testing regime is from the brutal reality of some students’ lives: “reading doesn’t matter when you feel your story is already written/ Either dead or getting booked/ Taking tests is stressful/ But bubbling in a Scantron doesn’t stop bullets from bursting” (p. 163). Bravo to Hagopian for including this and other examples of beautiful, moving student work.

The piece by McKay et al. reminds me of Michelle Alexander’s argument in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010) that mass incarceration and criminalization of young black men is evidence of a new “racial caste system” (p. 16). Students’ lack of academic achievement is not because they are too dumb or their teachers are too lazy. Many students are disempowered pawns in a system of structural inequality; their chances of academic success, like their chances of economic mobility, are slim in a rigged system.

*More Than a Score* reflects its contributors’ urgent sense that what’s at stake in our current testocracy is the future of public education in this country. As Helen Gym, cofounder of Parents United for Public Education, notes, we are in a “battle” between “strong community school institutions that affirm the culture, dignity, and value of our families and our neighborhoods” and “hyper-

individualized, transactional approaches to learning” (p.242) based on market-based ideas where children and parents are treated like customers rather than citizens with fundamental, democratic rights to education. For those working to “reclaim education” (p. 227) from these market-based forces and to empower a grassroots campaign centered around and powered by students, teachers, and parents, *More Than a Score* offers ideas for how to organize, both locally and nationally, how to protect the untenured teachers in our midst, how to use media effectively, and how to navigate complicated union relationships. Peggy Robertson, President of United Opt Out, for example, discusses her work, first on a blog, then on a Facebook page, and finally on a website offering opt-out instructions for every state. In another outstanding interview, Helen Gym, emphasizing the importance of local tools, discusses the Media Mobilizing Project designed to capitalize on local, independent videos made to document and humanize the story of Philadelphia education. This project enabled “Philly people” (p. 239) to share stories and educate each other and thus to create a community of resistance.

Monty Neill, executive director of the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, offers an important caution about the racial and class politics of these communities of resistance, highlighting my only concern about *More Than a Score*. He reminds readers that wealthier parents may opt out of some tests (Common Core-style assessments, for example) even while they use other tests (like the SATs or AP tests) “to perpetuate inequality” (p. 260). Parents of color in urban schools, he also notes, are more likely to be invested in school reform, based on “serious concerns about educational quality” (p. 260) in historically under-performing public schools.

Neill’s essay contributes to the question of whether we might be putting some students, especially young people in urban environments, in jeopardy by encouraging the opt-out message. Does

opting-out represent the most powerful long-term strategy to a rigged testing environment in an economically and educationally unequal society?

A poignant example of the danger of opting-out comes in the painful contribution by Karen Lewis, president of the Chicago Teachers Union, who writes of her personal history with multiple-choice standardized exams. She describes high scores on one set of standardized exams, the Iowas, followed by disappointingly low scores on another, the PSATs. Despite these scores, Lewis attended several elite colleges where, she writes, she thrived at writing essays and did “not recall taking a multiple-choice exam” (p. 79). After college, Lewis pursued medical school. She “took the Kaplan class” (p. 80) where she found the instructors “a bit smarmy” and the class “expensive, which made [her] think about that the kids who already had advantages would now have even more” (p. 80). Lewis closes her personal history with the news that while she was admitted to medical school, she “flunked out two years later, after never being able to master the art of multiple-choice test-taking” (p. 80). Lewis’s language here, describing *her* failure to be “able to master” test-taking, records how Lewis has internalized her lack of test-taking skill as a personal failing. Meanwhile Lewis’s privileged peers, building on existing advantages with Kaplan classes, enjoy success built on what Lani Guinier describes as the hidden “trappings of privilege” (p. x), including a host of educational resources well beyond Kaplan classes.

Chicago is lucky to have Lewis at the head of the Teachers Union; however, our society is less well off when students, like Lewis, do not master the art of test-taking. Why, when Lewis attended those elite colleges, wasn’t she also taught to master the system of testing? And why wasn’t she taught to think critically about the nature of standardized testing so that she could resist internalizing her lack of success? Both these skills, I think, are vital.

I applaud those in the opt-out movement who aim to reform a fundamentally unfair and damaging testing environment. Meanwhile, however, I think it’s crucial that we arm our underperforming students with the test-taking and critical thinking skills with which to face standardized tests and succeed in medical school.

Lewis writes of one of her best students, devastated by test results, who “internalized the scores as somehow reflective of her value and potential” (p. 82). Opting-out, it seems to me, is one political solution to a large social problem, but does it address this student’s particular needs? Does opting out of the test prepare this student for the later challenge of tackling medical school entrance exams and boards?

Brian Jones, a former New York City elementary teacher, describes the standardized test as a “genre” that requires students to “get into the head of the test-maker, understand their strategies for trickery, for offering false possible answers, for writing questions in a purposely confusing manner, and so on” (p. 74). He concedes, “such lessons are effective. You can teach an 8-year-old how to do process of elimination in a multiple-choice test, and you can improve their scores by doing so” (p. 74-75). Because you can teach these skills and improve their scores, however, should you? Should you prepare students to understand the complicated and sometimes nefarious ways in which standardized tests are constructed? Jones doesn’t think so. He asks, “Should an 8-year-old learn things like that? Is that justice? And given the fact that it is precisely those students who have the least resources who will inevitably have to spend the most time in preparation for these tests, we have to ask: is that fair?” (p. 75).

The 8-year-old is a small player in a high-stakes game involving money and power. *More Than a Score* is at its best when offering parents, students, teachers, and administrators ways to think about working on her behalf, including organizing against and resisting the bigger corporate and political players in our

national testocracy. Still, for me, as I think about educating teachers to work in urban districts, I'm passionate about the 8-year-old learning some test-taking skills even if she loses some valuable class time. She can learn those skills without losing months of instruction, and her curriculum need not be reduced to mindless and meaningless test preparation. Teaching students how to tackle

and how to think critically about assessments, like teaching them how to learn, should be part of the toolkit of any teaching professional.

Many things aren't fair about American society, and I think, sadly, the 8-year-olds getting the short end of the stick already know that.

## References

- Alexander, M. (2010). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.
- Guinier, L. (2015). *The tyranny of the meritocracy: Democratizing higher education in America*. Boston: Beacon Press.

## About the Reviewer

**Audrey A. Fisch** is Professor of English and Coordinator of secondary English education at New Jersey City University. Her recent work, with co-author Susan Chenelle, is the *Using Informational Text* series for Rowman and Littlefield, including *Using Informational Text to Teach To Kill a Mockingbird* (2014), *Using Informational Text to Teach a Raisin in the Sun* (2016), and *Connecting Across Disciplines: Collaborating with Informational Text* (2016).



 *Education Review/ Reseñas Educativas/ Resenhas Educativas* is supported by the edXchange initiative's Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and ***Education Review***, it is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or ***Education Review***. ***Education Review*** is published by the Scholarly Communications Group of the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University.

Please contribute reviews at <http://www.edrev.info/contribute.html>.

Connect with *Education Review* on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Education-Review/178358222192644>) and on Twitter @EducReview