Confronting the Assessment Industrial Complex
A Call for a Shift from Testing Rhetoric

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Assessment Industrial Complex (AIC)

PUBLIC SCHOOLS CAN LEAD to big profits for corporate entities and a variety of businesses. Test manufacturers, charter school management companies, education consulting companies, and other private organizations associated with the education market can all financially benefit from public school dollars. However, one major contributor to corporations' profits is the implementation of standardized assessments across the nations' public schools. According to one study conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools, "In the 2014-15 school year, 401 unique tests were administered across subjects in the 66 Great City School systems" (Hart et al., 2015, p. 9). Within these 66 school districts, on average, students will be required to take eight standardized assessments per year. These are only some of the types of tests students will take. This number does not account for other forms of assessments teachers, administrators, and states impose upon students (e.g., quizzes, formative assessments, teacher-constructed assessments, etc.).

The evidence of profitability and endless assessment is also readily apparent. For example, Taubman (2009) points out that, as early as 1999, writers were documenting that the education market was worth hundreds of billions of dollars and was steadily increasing. Strauss (2013) confirms this increase noting rising global market shares in the education industry from $2.5 trillion in 2005 to $4.4 trillion by 2013. Within the larger education industry, standardized assessments account for hundreds of billions of dollars annually (Picciano & Spring, 2013). For example, Pearson, the largest education company in the world, commented that they, "delivered more than 37 million tests, and during our peak testing period we successfully delivered tests to 5.8 million learners in a single week" (Pearson, 2018, para. 1). The large volume of tests helped Pearson to hold the top spot for profitability in the U.S. for student assessment, which accounted for 35% of the $1.2 billion market share (Pearson, 2018). Other education companies, including

Harcourt Educational Measurement, CTB McGraw-Hill, ETS, and Riverside Publishing, also seek to capitalize on mandated testing.

While these companies do more than make tests and their profitability does not alone warrant our critique, their influence on public education is worthy of our attention. Studies show that standardized testing, high stakes testing specifically, negatively impacts a disproportionate number of poor students and students of color (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lomax, West, Harmon, Viator, & Madaus, 1995; Madaus & Clarke, 2001). High-stakes testing is part of the neoliberal agenda that disregards basic facts about the implications of the testing regime. Neoliberalism ideologically assumes that the free market can and should solve social problems, and in the context of education, it legitimizes corporately produced high-stakes testing as a viable option for improving educational circumstances.

According to Saltman (2018), neoliberalism is

> an economic doctrine that calls for privatizing public goods and services, deregulating government controls over capital, and encouraging trade deregulation…. Neoliberals tend to see the role of the state as furthering the interests of businesses and owners, maintaining the repressive institutions of the society, and destroying the caregiving institutions of the society. (p. 109)

Thus, one relevant point of inquiry focuses on corporations' desire to manufacture profits via these assessments while ignoring the truth about the impacts that these assessments have on students' educational outcomes, including the many who are our most vulnerable and are most severely impacted by their profiteering. In the context of education, Au (2016) states,

> Within the framing of neoliberal multiculturalism, the empirical question becomes whether or not high-stakes, standardized testing, as the fulcrum on which free-market education policy mechanisms pivot, ameliorates educational inequality experienced by children of color in the United States, or exacerbates racialized inequalities. (p. 42)

Hence, high-stakes testing, in a post-truth society is one of the key mechanisms for the corporatization and commodification of education and, thus, the basis of the Assessment Industrial Complex (AIC). The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how the rhetoric of high-stakes testing via the AIC, despite its lack of veracity, impacts education and, thus, society, and to develop a counter-narrative that may offer an alternative discourse that empowers the public and reframes the current narrative.

What Is the Assessment Industrial Complex Exactly?

The AIC is an amalgam of corporate interests and neoliberal and neoconservative education reformers (herein referred to as Edreformers). This concept is reflective of Picciano and Spring's (2013) notion of the "educational industrial complex" (p. 2), which they describe as an array of corporate and political conflicts of interest influencing public school. Desai (2015) also used the term "educational industrial complex" to describe, albeit in fewer words, the interconnected relationship of corporations, philanthropies, government agencies, and

organizations that promote privatization and high-stakes testing. Saltman (2018) concurs and argues,

> Schools and districts have come to be increasingly modeled on corporate culture...teachers need to deliver numerically measurable results...curriculum and pedagogy are increasingly standardized, and schools must "compete" against each other for test scores to secure federal funding while parents are described as "consumers." (p. xiv)

While Saltman, Desai, Picciano and Spring, and other scholars have documented the ever-increasing growth and influence of corporations on public education from control of the curriculum to teacher preparation and beyond, we turn our attention specifically to the assessment aspect of the larger complex. We coined the phrase "Assessment Industrial Complex" to underscore the vast array of stakeholders involved who ultimately profit from this system of assessment and accountability. By focusing on the AIC, this paper exposes rhetorical fallacies that limit discourse about the purpose of education and exploit the public's desire to improve educational circumstances for their own profits.

Similar to the military industrial complex (Eisenhower, 1961/2011), the AIC amalgamates corporate and political interests. Education corporations lobby for profitable educational policy, and in turn, policy makers rely on standardized assessments to validate their policies (Au, 2016; Journey for Justice Alliance, 2014; Saltman, 2016). This relationship ensures successful outcomes for both the politicians and corporations (among other entities) who fund their campaigns. While on the surface there appears to be heavy investments in public education, those resources are directed to the assessment industry, and despite the rhetoric to the contrary, they even undermine the public schools they promise to help in the process by simply lying to the American public. Most relevant, through critical analysis of this complex, we argue that the AIC undermines participatory dialogue and reinforces historical hierarchies of control.

It is the nature of language to influence and shape thoughts and outcomes (Bourdieu & Thompson, 1991; Chomsky, 1972; Fairclough, 2001), and the rhetoric of the AIC shapes the public's understanding of testing and its relationship to education. More specifically, under the AIC rhetoric, knowledge is purchased, not made, and becomes anti-dialogical and reduced to the convergence of political and corporate values. Edreformers then create a false narrative around the test scores to persuade the public that standardized testing policies are achieving their intended outcomes (e.g., creating equal opportunities for individuals to achieve their goals and aspirations; Hursh, 2015). In reality, the AIC perpetuates an inequitable, racialized system of oppression that further marginalizes low-income students and those of color. In conjunction with various racialized institutions, the AIC limits students' capacity to function and engage in the world in democratic ways.

AIC Rhetoric in the Post-Truth Era

In this post-truth era in the U.S., standards-based, high-stakes testing has become the "fulcrum" on which standards-based education rests (Au, 2016, p. 42). The language of reform, with its emphasis on testing, codifies the standards-based education reform movement. The rhetoric maintains the illusion that, if we offer rigorous standards, hold students, teachers, and administrators accountable via testing and evaluation, and severely penalize those who fail to meet

the testing benchmarks (which continuously seem to change—see Strauss, 2014), we will inevitably reach the utopian notion that *all* students will succeed (Apple, 2006; Au, 2012; Jackson, 2004; Vinson & Ross, 2003). The rhetoric of standards and accountability (e.g., mastery, criterion-based assessment, etc.) also assumes that everyone desires the same outcomes throughout the process of education, devaluing, ignoring, or even condemning differing cultural values and diversity (Weiner, 2014). As stated on the website of the Common Core Standards for College and Career Readiness, "The standards define the knowledge and skills students *should* gain throughout their K-12 education in order to graduate high school prepared to succeed in entry-level careers, introductory academic college courses, and workforce training programs" (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2019, para. 5, emphasis added). The rhetoric of standards, with its focus on criterion-based assessments, limits the discourse and controls the narrative about what the aims and goals of education can be and, in an Orwellian fashion, reduces linguistic forms and, thus, people's capacity to envision other purposes of education. The term "career" implies that education is about becoming a worker, not necessarily a learner or a citizen in a democratic society. However, as Jackson (2004) argues, this neoliberal discourse takes place within a larger, though misleading, language of education "purported to serve citizens in enhancing their individual development and individual interests as if they were autonomous and disconnected from the national agenda" (p. 223). Neoliberalism uses misleading language to undermine trust in public institutions, and this compromises evident truths. Recent developments in political populism have provoked Peters (2018), Suiter (2016), and others to use the term "post-truth" to describe how the alt-right and social media outlets use language to disrupt reality. Former Congressmen John Dingle (2018) observed, "The playbook is simple: Lie. Repeat the lie. Then attack the journalists who expose those lies as being liars themselves—or, in modern parlance, 'promoters of fake news'" (para, 18). These developments in deceptive discourse further undermine public institutions, while discrediting scholars who warn about neoliberalism in schools and criticize the AIC.

Discursive Deceptions

An astute example of this discursive deception is seen by an organization called Edbuild. Edbuild was founded in 2014 by Rebecca Sibilia, the former Vice President for Fiscal Strategy at StudentFirst [an organization founded by Michelle Rhee, the former, and dethroned, Chancellor of Washington DC schools]. Edbuild's mission is to "analyze per-pupil funding levels and state funding mechanisms that ensure 'equity' and 'adequacy' considerations" (EdBuild, 2019b). Like Rhee, Sibilia is part of the Edreform machine and a proponent of school choice, vouchers, charters, and testing. In fact, Schneider (2015b) posted on her blog a post whose title established Sibilia and her company as a "Charter's Little Helper," pointing out that, on her Linkedin bio page, Sibilia describes Edbuild as a "'venture capital project to utilize charter school facility funding and practices to renovate District of Columbia Public Schools buildings" (Schneider, 2015b, para. 4). On the surface, the discourse of Edbuild is compelling, including statements such as, "EdBuild works to raise national awareness related to the current problems with the way states fund public schools. Our data visualizations and policy reports demonstrate the illogical, outdated, and segregating nature of our state funding systems" (EdBuild, 2019a).

There certainly is merit in the argument that school funding is both inequitable and unfair (Baker, Farrie, & Sciarra, 2018); however, Edbuild's approach to both the analyses of the data and their choice of solutions are anything but progressive or in support of promoting public schooling.

Edbuild's coopting of progressive language while undermining public schooling is clearly seen on its website:

> EdBuild is a catalyst organization, working to fundamentally disrupt the status quo of illogical & inequitable school funding…national voice work will build a public narrative around the illogical and detrimental construct of local school funding policies that create the incentive and ability to segregate along socioeconomic lines. With supporting data, this work will be entrusted to a social justice organization to pursue greater systemic equity in the system via the judicial branch. (EdBuild, 2019a, para 1-3)

Though the language is anything but subtle, it is effective and powerful. The argument relies on several key rhetorical strategies: create an argument that is conceivable and uses your opponents' language, base that argument on data few people can distrust or argue against, and then repeat, repeat, repeat. Edbuild's use of key progressive terms like "social justice" and "equity" can be misleading given that their funders support a neoliberal agenda for public schools. Their funders include the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Gates Foundation), the Walton Family, and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation to name a few. The blatant contradictions of this organization are almost too fatuous to address; yet, Edbuild is disrupting traditional, public school funding. By their own grandiose admission, they have had three state engagements "helping to overhaul current school finance systems; 113 features or mentions in the national media; 82 write-ups, citations, or features in local press." (EdBuild, 2019a, n.p.). So, while the website professes that "EdBuild works to raise national awareness related to the current problems with the way states fund public schools" (EdBuild, 2019a, para. 2), this is code for their real mission, which is to direct public funding to charters and private schools.

In fact, by her own admission, Sibilia considers the failure of public schools an opportunity for change. In 2015, in New Orleans, Edreformers gathered to attend a policy summit sponsored by the American Federation for Children [this organization was founded and funded by Betsy Devos]. During the meeting, Sibilia argued that school districts going bankrupt is a "huge opportunity" for them (Persson, 2015, para. 8), and that "if we can eliminate that in an entire urban system…[then we can] redistribute everything with all new models. And so, you've heard it first: bankruptcy might be, like, the thing that leads to the next education revolution" (Persson, 2015, para. 8). The potential for this blatant and "naked power grab" (Persson, 2015, para. 9) described in Sibilia's comment speaks to the unabashed and shameless efforts of Edreformers and their determination to dismantle public education. When Sibilia states that bankruptcy can lead to "the next education revolution," it can lead stakeholders to think that this is a positive outcome for these failing school systems, when in fact, they could be a prescription for corporate takeovers of public schools (Hursh, 2015; Ravitch, 2015b; Schneider, 2015a).

Edbuild is a clear example of the danger of Edreform rhetoric. Because the language of education reform, with its focus on testing data, is clear, concise, and (seemingly) effective, it allows people to "buy into" this vision of a greater, more equitable and just America. Proponents of standards-based education and accountability claim that all will have success if only we, America, have high standards and testing for all students. And if test scores highlight failing schools and mediocre or underperforming teachers, schools, and students, then all the better for having as many tests as possible. Taubman (2009) contends that the incessant repetition of the same dire prediction about the state of education by various sources (e.g., policy statements, publications, statistics, research, etc.) eventually creates a "reality of its own" (p. 74). He states,

> Striking is that those statistics about dropout rates, student preparedness, college success, our students' academic performance...the correlation between test results and later academic or job success, and the low caliber of teachers, schools, and students are taken as truth, when in fact there is enormous disagreement about them. (p. 74)

As Taubman (2009) points out, the public goes "numb," which leads to the "eventual attitude of 'going along to get along,'" rather than challenging the status quo (p. 75). The beguiling nature of this rhetoric supersedes the reality of its true effects. There is immense danger when "fake news" becomes the standard bearer of truth. In fact, the narrative of pervasive failure is "immune to facts" (Gottlieb, 2015, p. xv); no fact can disprove it. Thus, testing "data" has provided the means to solidify the overwhelming failure of our public education system (Au, 2016; Au & Gourd, 2013).

Equity and Equality for All: Not Really

Another rhetorical claim that Edreformers repeatedly proffer is that testing and accountability will lead to equality and equity for all students (Massell, Kirst, & Hoppe, 1997; Mathis, 2010; Rhee, 2012). These are doubtful assertions at best. For example, Madaus and Clarke (2001), through a meta-analysis of 100 years' worth of standardized testing data, concluded that standardized assessments have an adverse effect on racial minorities. Knoester and Au (2017) argue that not only does high-stakes testing fail to decrease the achievement gap, but it has led to the re-segregation of schools by race throughout the nation,

> the use of powerful managerial tools such as standardized tests tied to high-stakes decisions…serve to racially code schools and to place enormous pressure on schools with low test scores (generally those with large numbers of children of color and living in poverty) to teach to the test. (pp. 3-4)

Additionally, Au (2016) advances this argument stating, "any and all claims to the use of high-stakes, standardized testing to promote racial equity and justice are ideologically driven and demonstrably false in the face of the materially racist effects of testing on children of color" (p. 54). As the literature clearly indicates, the testing industry's attempt to generate equity clearly fails to achieve its claims, but in a post-truth society, facts no longer matter. One is also left to ponder precisely how ignoring the differences between cultures, individual experiences and knowledge, and local context will lead to equity and equality in education.

Buzzwords, Reductive Language, Repeat, Repeat, Repeat

The rhetoric of standards and testing, though often wrapped in phrases of social justice, reinforces hegemonic conditions. While a discussion of the relationship between language and thought is beyond the scope of the paper, language influences people's thought processes (Gleitman & Papafragou, 2013). Overarchingly, Edreformers' discourse emphasizes rigorous standards to ensure opportunity and global competitiveness. Educational buzzwords such as "Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)" or "college and career ready" are

reductive intentionally. This rhetoric limits the general public's capacity to engage in complex dialogue, since who can argue that we should not be globally competitive in the 21st century? For example, Edreformers argue that by increasing STEM courses in K-12 (and higher education) or increasing the number of assessments students must take or by adopting common standards across all states (Mathis, 2010), we will increase our competitive advantage. These and many other claims abound when Edreformers discuss public education. Proponents of school choice, standards, high-stakes testing, and other neoliberal, neoconservative values find endless opportunity to reiterate these notions in reductive ways to persuade the public that these ideals are what will save America and lead us back to our prior "greatness." As Taubman (2009) asserts, if you repeat a refrain enough times, the message will become reality for some if not many, particularly when those in power reiterate that message to further advance their own agenda.

Another issue is the impact this rhetoric has on how we perceive ourselves as a nation in a globalized economy and world. What messages do Americans receive that shape their understanding of curriculum, testing, and accountability? How does the rhetoric of standards-based education and testing frame our understanding of the role and purpose of education? How does the rhetoric of school choice shape the public's understanding of the role it potentially plays to ameliorate our educational "ills?" If Americans buy into the rhetoric that we as a nation lag behind other nations, as the manipulation of international test scores purport (Berliner & Glass, 2014), then we suddenly find ourselves feeling threatened and succumb to those who hold decision making power (Apple, 2006). Consequently, it becomes critical to shift Edreformers' rhetoric of standards-based education, with its focus on testing and accountability, to form a new discourse that focuses on diversity, inclusion, social justice, and humanity.

[Neoliberal] Rhetoric and Action Shapes Policy

Similar to the "Military Industrial Complex" (Eisenhower, 1961/2011), the AIC relies on think tanks and other organizations to shape policy and sway public opinion. For example, Schneider (2015a) details how the Gates Foundation imposed the Common Core Standards (CCS) on public education. While on the surface this may look like acts of philanthropy from the Gates Foundation to promote the common good, the Gates Foundation usurped the democratic process through what Saltman (2016) and others describe as venture philanthropy, where a false generosity actually functions as an investment toward bigger profits and/or influence for the investor. The National Governors Association, Student Achievement Partners, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and Achieve all helped craft CCS; collectively, these organizations accepted $147.9 million from the Gates Foundation. Additionally, the Gates Foundation paid think tanks like American Agora Foundation ($100,000), American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research ($1,068, 788), and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute to promote CCS. Even teacher unions, like the American Federation of Teachers ($5,400,000) and National Education Association ($3,982,597), and professional organizations, such as Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development ($3,269,428) and National Association of State Boards of Education ($2,328,625), accepted Gates Foundation dollars to support CCS (Schneider, 2015a). Ravitch (2013) notes what was happening:

> Instead of developing a democratic process in which teachers, teacher educators, scholars, specialists in the education of children with disabilities, specialists in the education of

> English learners, and specialists in early childhood education were consulted at every step in the process, instead of trying out the standards to see how they work in real classrooms with real children, the Gates Foundation and the Department of Education took a shortcut. (para. 12)

The Gates Foundation invested $400 million in the CCS, and these investments influenced $4 trillion worth of policy in taxpayer dollars at local, state, and federal levels (Pullmann, 2017).

Giroux and Giroux (2006), Newfield (2002), and others explain that neoliberal ideology has dominated American policy dating back to the 1970s. Under a shared belief that the free-market can self-regulate and government regulations thwart prosperity, neoliberalism casts a wide political tent where both the Republican and Democratic Parties find common ground. Both parties' ameliorative rhetoric and political promises depend on free market solutions to solve society's woes, which consequently provide ongoing opportunities for corporate interests to capitalize from public spheres and the commons (Hursh, 2008; Watkins, 2012). Even as some hoped the presidential election of Barack Obama would revitalize constitutional democracy and a pivot away from the neoliberal period of American history (Mahao, 2009), President Obama continued, reinforced, and even extended several neoliberal traditions (Carr & Porfilio, 2011). Obama's first education initiative, *Race to the Top*, compelled states to embrace market principles of competition and efficiency, offering $4.35 billion in public funds that would eventually reinforce corporate reform of public schools (Hursh, 2015: Gottlieb, 2015).

Despite political bipartisan support, neoliberalism has its share of critics. According to Giroux and Giroux (2006), neoliberalism reduces societal relationships to economic ones:

> Neoliberal pervasiveness is evident not only by its unparalleled influence on the global economy but also in its power to redefine the very nature of politics and sociality. Free market fundamentalism rather than democratic idealism is now the driving force of economics and politics in most of the world. (p. 22)

As the economic trumps the societal, political relationships based on democratic ideals are usurped and even replaced with free market principles where progress is measured through profits. However, because there is no explicit statement that profits drive the Neoliberal agenda, as Means (2013) argues, austerity provides opportunity for those with a steady cash flow to intervene on behalf of those "in need" to then offer market solutions to social problems. The key tactic is to then eschew the truth and simply state lies: Schools are failing, but businesses and philanthropists can save us.

A strong example of this, as already demonstrated by the Gates Foundation, is the influence of specific philanthropic organizations that purport to reform education for the benefit of society, in particular students in poor, urban communities (Hursh, 2008, 2015; Kozol, 2012; Watkins, 2012). Again, the Gates Foundation is one such organization that has devoted extensive resources and capital to public school education reforms. Recently, in fact, it has committed to investing 1.7 billion dollars over the next five years to "philanthropic organizations" devoted to building school networks (Camera, 2017). Despite their own admission of "mea culpa" (Camera, 2017, para. 12) for previously failed initiatives, like the CCS, the Gates Foundation is still committed to using private dollars to heavily influence the outcomes of public education.

The AIC: A Form of Symbolic Violence

After decades of the AIC's influence on public education, another consequence we find is what Bourdieu (as cited in Saltman, 2018) calls "symbolic violence" (p. 7). According to Saltman (2018), symbolic violence is "the devaluation of one's culture, knowledge, language tastes, and disposition" (p. 113). Standardized testing imposes symbolic violence by establishing what counts and what does not count as knowing to the benefit of dominant cultural oppression. But more alarming is what Saltman points out:

> The student is thus made complicit in her own cultural oppression. This is a cultural oppression that has material effects: the sorting and sifting techniques of the school such as testing are used to position students to do different work and to have different things. (p. 7)

To extend Saltman's point, the AIC does violence to the possibility of dialogue itself, by declaring the aims and methods of education final, scientific, and not up for debate. The positivist theoretical framework behind standards and standardized assessment, thus, undermines the imagination, reinforcing hegemonic conditions of consumption and control (Weiner, 2014). One should not wonder why then young people feel cynical about the world in which they exist (Giroux, 2001). Rather than close the achievement gap, the AIC has effectively made it worse (Au, Brown, & Calderon, 2016; Means, 2013; Weiner, 2014). Moreover, as Childers (2017) describes, the AIC robs students of the right to define success in their own terms. Means (2013) provides detailed examples of how democracy erodes through the AIC for students of color in inner-city schools. Students lack curricular input and are relegated to learning an often-meaningless curriculum (Au, 2016). Under the AIC, schools have increasingly controlled students, particularly students of color, by determining what they can learn and when and how they can learn it. Much of the limited resources allocated to schools serving mostly students of color, especially, go to seemingly endless test preparation (Kozol, 2012; Means, 2013). As a consequence of the AIC, communities of color have lost a say in what their children learn and how they get to learn it. Certainly, the AIC does not deserve all the blame for the destruction of public schools and the oppressive nature of curriculum, but it has contributed to eroding democratic liberties from the very students it promises to protect.

What Happened to a Being a Participant in a Democracy?

For a democracy to function properly, the interests of all its members need to be represented, and the voices of all its people need to be heard and acknowledged (Chomsky, 2003, Freirie, 1970; Janoski, 1998). Under the AIC, our democracy is threatened. Those in power, Edreformers, want to generate as much profit as possible for themselves and their shareholders while maintaining control of knowledge and power. Testing is one of the major control mechanisms that allows them to do this. One may challenge this argument by stating that we still live in a democratic republic in the United States. We still have the agency to vote and use that vote to change who represents us. However, this is an oversimplification of our current predicament. Those who represent us, quite often, do so under a falsehood: whom they truly represent are their donors and funders (Ravitch, 2015a; Saltman, 2016; Schneider, 2015a). As

mentioned earlier, we have seen billions of dollars flow into education by would be "philanthropists" who then determine how students are taught, what knowledge is of most worth (i.e., the Common Core Standards), how much they are tested, etc. However, one need only examine the data to see the impact of testing and accountability on education, specifically on students and the teachers responsible for educating them (Au, 2007, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Madaus & Clarke, 2001).

As this essay demonstrates, the Assessment Industrial Complex is vast and powerful. In this neoliberal, post-truth period of America, it is difficult to remain hopeful and avoid feelings of despair and anxiety. However, there are reasons to stay optimistic. Advocacy and grassroots organizations are developing a counter-narrative to the discourse of the AIC and the Edreformers that comprise it. Organizations like the Network for Public Education, the Progressive Education Network, the Social Justice Education Network, and others inspire new possibilities of change. Currently, progressive candidates are winning elections in districts throughout the country in which they once would not even have bothered to run. While there has been bipartisan support for the AIC, we see discontent among both parties' perspectives on testing, even in a red state like Texas. For example, the education commissioner of Texas, Robert Scott (R) referred to high-stakes testing as a "'perversion' of what education should be" and went on to refer to "'the assessment and accountability regime' not only [as] a 'cottage industry but a military-industrial complex'" (Strauss, 2012, para. 2-3). Furthermore, regarding the impact of high-stakes testing, Scott also observed: "What we've done in the past decade, is we've doubled down on the test every couple of years, and used it for more and more things, to make it the end-all, be-all" (Strauss, 2012, para. 4). As these Republican responses manifest, we argue that it is an appropriate time to have meaningful public dialogue and debate about the AIC.

This essay proffers a definition of the AIC as well as a brief description of how it operates. Going forward, we contend that we have an intellectual responsibility, particularly in the era of post-truth, to confront the rhetoric and outcomes of the AIC. Future research should focus on a more thorough understanding of the AIC and alternative forms of discourse. Rather than talk about our children and students through the labels of test scores and reading levels, we propose, instead, that we contextualize what it means to learn and articulate ways to support democratic values within the curriculum. In confronting the AIC, we strengthen our democracy.

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