
Book Review

An Activists Handbook for the Education Revolution: United Opt Out's Test of Courage

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An Activist Handbook for the Education Revolution: United Opt Out's Test of Courage
Edited by Morna McDermott, Peggy Robertson, Rosemarie Jensen, and Ceresta Smith.
Published by Information Age Publishing, Charlotte, NC.

ACTS OF RESISTANCE SERVE TO CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT the values and expectations that are at the foundation of our democratic society, ultimately pushing us to reflect upon who we are, what we cherish, and how we act to address inequality as we move forward as a nation. This timely book documents the ongoing struggles, successes, and determination of a core group of educator activists dedicated to addressing inequalities within our education system, especially those perpetuated as a result of high-stakes testing or under the guise of education reform. *An Activists Handbook for the Education Revolution: United Opt Out's Test of Courage* offers a comprehensive analysis that is both personal and communal in nature, outlining how these activists have sought to take a stand on behalf of both children and the craft of teaching to reclaim the promise of education and public schools grounded in our democratic ideals of *equality, access, empowerment, and possibility*. Though many of these very terms have been co-opted through privatization, corporate take-over, and contemporary discourses of "education reform," the authors of this edited volume call upon educators, students, and parents/guardians alike to take back what is rightfully theirs.

The book provides an invaluable contribution to anyone and everyone concerned about the future of education, not only in the United States, but within the context of American global imperialism. It demonstrates the potential and power of how a small group of dedicated individuals

can make a difference, despite enormous challenges, by cultivating a movement, which has already inspired thousands of others to participate. Just as Lindblum's (1977) classic work shines a spotlight on the relationship between government and capitalism to expose the privileged positions of business on a global scale, Ricardo Rosa's forward to this book explains how the efforts of *United Opt Out* (UOO) effectively extends such a critique of social inequity, moving from theory to action. McDermott, Robertson, Jensen, and Smith (2015) help carry the torch by framing public schools as institutions representative of democratic practice that are independent of neo-liberal corporate and political influence—that want to use schools to promote their own agendas—rather than teaching and learning for creativity, imagination, a sense of the possible, liberation of the human potential, and working for positive change in society. Importantly, the authors also situate their efforts within the larger social, political, and economic context—ultimately exposing and challenging the inequalities resulting from, and privileges granted to, market fundamentalism.

At its core, this new publication promotes a humanistic (re)conceptualization of education and challenges standardized testing as part of an unbridled assault on democracy, freedom of speech, humanistic values, and critical thinking. Chomsky and Robichaud (2014) among others argue that standardized testing is part of the wider neo-liberal ideology for the concentration of privatization and power. Jaramillo and Barros (2011) note large-scale investment in education by both private corporations and the federal government underscore the “hidden ideology of education in the service of capital rather than education as a means to resolve society's most imminent problems” (p. 74) such as poverty, homelessness, hunger, violence, and joblessness among youth and their families. Jaramillo and Barros further contend that these political and capitalistic acts of aggression commodify those things that make us human, leading to ignorance in our moral and ethical considerations, psychological and social health, and construction of knowledge. This book is grounded in a philosophy of education that is humanistic, anti-corporate, and promotes the development of human beings as creative free-thinkers who ask thoughtful and challenging questions to address political and social concerns. In doing so, this publication inspires mindful resistance to the assault on free and equitable public schooling.

An Activist Handbook for the Education Revolution: United Opt Out's Test of Courage consists of nine chapters written by an impressive array of professionals with extensive knowledge and experience in education, non-profit management, and urban studies. Although situated within an educational context, the content serves as an invaluable guide for anyone interested in confronting inequality providing useful ideas for research, advocacy, and organizing for educators and non-educators alike. The edited volume is an important source for teachers and parents who are frustrated with schools serving the needs of political power players and profiteers. University students could benefit from use of the book when examining the goals, purposes, and ethical considerations of education. And, for those interested in research, the book promotes deeper understanding of corporate education reform by offering insights into its corrupt influence on teaching and learning and the implications for free and equitable public education.

The first chapter provides a thoughtful analysis of the corporate-model of education reform, contextualizing it with regard to colonization and manifest destiny. Through this historical lens, Morna McDermott frames the development of corporate takeover of education as predatory education policy and manipulation of communities and public schools for private interests. This first chapter firmly establishes the movement with the framework of Giroux's (2004) argument that democracy is being undercut by colonizing that which is *public* into the world of the *private* enterprise. Giroux further recognizes the values of Bauman's (2001) observation that “...it is the private that colonizes the public space, squeezing out and chasing away everything which cannot

be fully, without residue, translated into vocabulary of private interests and pursuits” (p. 107) thereby diminishing the capacity of people’s struggle for democracy and public voice.

The second chapter offers an introspective examination of the development of the *United Opt Out* high-stakes testing movement, specifically the personal and professional reasons, motivations, and experiences which coalesced the core member activists. The members describe themselves as “pissed off radicals” for whom opting out was more than a personal choice. “It was advocating for individual into collective actions that would entirely dismantle corporate-driven education policy...it was a call for civil disobedience...a large scale boycott of the takeover of public education...and we were pissed” (p. 23). Emphasized are the importance of the distribution of labor for action, especially when making decisions requiring consensus, and the development of guiding principles to maintain solidarity when confronted by other outside groups who challenge the goals and values of the movement. Specific suggestions that can help the reader strengthen work related to these areas include: identifying the components that make a team work; being prepared for complex alliances with other groups; determining who you can work with, who you can’t work with, and recognizing those who may not share your goals; and the value of making group decisions through democratic dialogue and deliberation to help ensure that everyone is onboard with expectations to achieve the desired outcome.

Chapter three, written by Ceresta Smith, focuses on the changing narrative of high-stakes testing, especially within the context of the historical and contemporary issues of social justice. The author expands the argument that many public school policies and practices reflect historically deep societal divides based on race and class which have and continue to negatively influence the education of impoverished children and children of color. Similar to Gillen’s analysis in *Educating for Insurgency* (2014), Smith describes the educational environment for these children as nothing less than a present-day slave plantation system using modern data collection methods:

And in a more pronounced and documented way, supports are put in place to continue the stamping of dumb and ignorant on Black folk, Brown folk, and poor folk via an accountability that perpetuates an oppression akin to that of the social structure and hierarchy of the plantation system that depended on chattel slavery to exist. All this continues to exist and is perpetuated by a system of public education accountability wrought with ethnically and racially biased high-stakes testing that hands down, puts the slave master and his plantation system to shame in a head-to-head competition during a period of history where slavery is supposed to be outlawed. (p. 40-41)

Smith further argues that corporate elites and public government officials use the achievement gap to “create a distorted narrative that America’s public educational system is failing the entire American populous” especially non-white and impoverished children; and other manufactured propaganda, such as the film *Waiting for Superman* (2011), to perpetuate the myth of a system so broken that it needs “market-driven reforms, charters, vouchers, and teacher accountability while denigrating teachers’ unions” (p. 41). Although Smith’s arguments are shared among a growing body of researchers and educators the inclusion in this volume is particularly valued because of the connections to opting out and the importance of that process for voices that continue to be marginalized and oppressed. Unfortunately, for too many members in society high-stakes standardized testing is acceptable, and even viewed as necessary, as long as it is primarily used in the education of impoverished children or children of color. The central message raised in this chapter focuses on who decides and controls free public education, why certain policy decisions are made, and how the process is reflective of historical racism and classism. These are much larger issues that go far beyond just opting out. Understanding these connections is key as we move forward as a society. They may be especially valuable for university teachers and students

who analyze the influence of various societal forces on education, especially in metropolitan areas, and engage in university-community civic partnerships for social change.

Peggy Robertson (chapter four), and Shaun Johnson, Ceresta Smith, and Morna McDermott (chapter five) address the beginning stages of organizing and conducting *United Opt Out* events, and ways to broaden the conversation to place the UOO movement within the context of corporate/for-profit take-over of education. The authors share the successes and struggles of growing the movement from a group of concerned educators seeking social change initially naïve to how that might look, to fostering a national movement that would courageously critique the American Legislation Exchange Council (ALEC), a conglomeration of corporate and political profiteers whose members include Pearson, the Walton Foundation, and the Gates Foundation. Of special interest to readers is the section focused on the interactions with the national education labor organizations—the National Educators Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), whose historical support of collective bargaining, teacher due process, and equity in education has effectively been surrendered by their leaders, according to the authors. What is clear from these chapters is that despite the odds for failure the *United Opt Out* movement coalesced around the goal to ensure free public schools and educational equality. For anyone considering engaging in social change, advocacy, or community organizing this is an invaluable message—the landscape shifts and challenges exist. Yet, underlying these challenges there are opportunities that can help transform understanding of the issues and how to approach them. This process can lead to a renewed sense of meaning and purpose to the work.

A powerful narrative for the value of social justice, offering insight into the challenges faced by the activists confronted by voices of opposition (e.g., public attacks on social networking sites and in other media outlets) as well as making an important distinction between supporting opting out *for* public education or opting out *from* public education altogether is articulated in chapter six. Smith and McDermott persuasively advocate for the former and clarify their commitment to ensure “opportunities for all children to attend sustainable, equitably funded, meaningful, engaging, and accessible schools” (p. 113) ever cognizant of the complexities of race, racism, language, and resistance. This chapter stands out as a defining point for the movement’s necessary evolution, when the activists’ individual convictions for social justice became deepened through introspective conversations that grew as much out of supporting one another as their communal commitment to public education. The process proved transformational—strengthening the resolve and actions of the movement.

A case study of educational reform in Massachusetts serves as the central focus of chapter seven. Ruth Rodriguez highlights the realities and lessons learned within the context of educational politics and decisions made by that state’s political leaders to ensure high-stakes testing remains a central part of education reform. According to Rodriguez, ignored is the reality of the increase in segregated schools, the role of poverty, and growing rate of incarceration of youth, mostly of color. These concerns raise fundamental questions about whether simply opting out is sufficient to address the pervasiveness of educational inequality. As this book argues, free public education is reflective of deeply entrenched economic, social, cultural, and political forces wielding power over educational decisions and outcomes. Critical for the readers, consideration of opting out within these contexts is central to any meaningful dialogue or action regarding change.

Laurie Murphy makes a compelling analysis in chapter eight for the importance of strategic thinking and explores factors that influenced other successful social movements, such as those undertaken to ensure civil and gender rights. Murphy outlines the specific steps that *United Opt Out* has taken, and continues to utilize, to accomplish its work. These strategies include decisions

regarding administrative roles, communication, organization and structure, message clarification, and the promotion of UOO's vision and voice, both targeted and more broadly. Important for others doing this type of work is UOO's approach in ensuring credibility and maintaining integrity.

Establishing *United Opt Out's* credibility as an influential movement was undertaken on multiple levels. First, a sense of confidence permeated the movement that the leaders were capable and willing to address tough issues. Second, the UOO website showcased original content, partnership documents, and produced other resources such as a radio show and press releases, reflecting an experienced and competent administrative team. Third, although small, underfunded, and with limited human resources, the leadership team realized that the public loves an "underdog". Murphy offers the analogy of a small group of activists challenging elite individuals and well-funded private corporations on behalf of children and society as a major influence on the public perception of their work: "The David and Goliath story resonated with parents, teachers, and community members, alike. Rather than ignoring us, they rallied behind us. In the end, the issue of our size generated additional media attention and a new group of supporters with a penchant for cheering for the underdog" (p. 148). This ability to identify and transform a disadvantage into advantage is an important reminder for any social movement or community-activist group's capacity to influence change.

While credibility was crucial for the movement, integrity is the soul of *United Opt Out*. Human values, ethics, and character are too often overlooked in a world increasingly dominated by corporate interests that continually promote educational competency rather than human goodness. The emphasis placed on integrity stands out as a major contribution of this work, not only as a standard for other national movements, but how it served as the underlying guiding principle for what *United Opt Out* represents: "with so many short cuts and temptations surrounding our children, it is important that they understand that sometimes the right answer is not the easy one, and that sometimes you will have to sacrifice and work harder, all because of an ethical choice you made. They need to realize that, at the end of the day, your choices matter" (p. 152). Given the display of pervasive unethical behavior in today's political environment this is a critical message for children and adults alike.

An impassioned invocation by Tim Slekar for moving *United Opt Out* forward is presented as chapter nine. This section of the book provides a resounding call for readers, both educators and non-educators, to reclaim the conversation so that our collective consciousness around matters of *accountability* and *poverty* are not shaped by neo-liberals, and the "myths and lies promulgated by billionaire owned media campaigns" (p. 170) might be challenged. This sentiment echoes Giroux's (2000) insight that not only is the attack on education a form of domination, but that the distorted perceptions about youth, culture, and democracy are cultivated by the market and commercial media. For Giroux, acceptance of these distortions "excuse the adult world from any notion of responsibility toward youth by appealing to a thriving economy, the natural world or disinterestedness; they reproduce race, class, and cultural hierarchies; and they limit citizenship to a narrowly privatized undertaking" (2000, p. 13-14). McDermott and colleague's work in *An Activist Handbook for the Education Revolution* helps to further shatter the myths designed to destroy public schooling by advocating for expanding the public spaces to regain control of the conversation to ensure open and equitable education consistent with a democratic society. In the final chapter, Rosemarie Jensen exemplifies UOO as a movement, its players, and the necessity to maintain and express opposition, voice, and ownership of the conversation for the benefit of all affected—especially the children. This is especially valuable as the work of *United Opt Out* moves

forward and the way in which it utilizes the growing voice of students, teachers, and parents for schools that make a difference.

This edited volume enables the reader to learn more about why national movements emerge, how they can develop, and the conflicts that they face. Not only do the authors document the successes and challenges of the work, but more importantly they share what they learned along the way, and how they may have been more effective. For example, *United Opt Out* is a strong supporter of organized labor and collective bargaining. Yet, in 2012 when the group posted a challenge on their website for the NEA to “terminate immediately the pattern of negotiation and capitulation leading to policies destructive of public education, of children’s lives, and representative of a derogation of educational professions” (p. 92) unexpected responses from the public education sector charged that UOO was not only hostile to unions but supportive of their dissolution. The members of UOO countered with clarification of their position but refused a revision despite calls from their supporters. The activists note that they struggled deeply with their decision to post the challenge and whether the risk to confront the largest teachers union in the country had jeopardized their goals. They wondered if there might have been a different strategy, whether they would be compromising their position if they amended the challenge, and what unforeseen impact on the movement’s credibility an amendment might entail. In the end, a rebuttal was drafted and published on their website. In the years following, the UOO leadership team reflected upon whether they were too young of a movement to expect widespread acceptance for their position, or, if their challenge to the NEA helped create an environment for even more public education activists to increasingly become critical of large unions and ill-conceived education reform policies. A key message from this book is clear: radical activism necessitates risk-taking and calculating those risks requires carefully crafted strategy, ongoing deliberation and dialogue with colleagues, and having the integrity to do what you believe is right.

An Activist Handbook for the Education Revolution: United Opt Out’s Test of Courage primarily focuses on the work and voice of a small group of activists during their first years as *United Opt Out*. The volume candidly portrays the ethical dilemma behind allying with some while rejecting alliances with others; the cornerstone of which is posed in their central question on page 113 “What are you for?” The purpose of the book is to reclaim the Opt Out movement from those wanting to take it over: the reform effort (claiming opting out is only the purview of soccer moms); and the far right (opting out of testing to protect all of our children from the harms of the federal government). Neither of these goals are representative of the *United Opt Out* activists who *started the movement*, and who vigorously resist these efforts to ensure that opting out remains where it belongs—on the side of equity, social justice and democracy for all people, especially those marginalized communities most harmed by decades of racist and classist reform policies, most notably of which is high-stakes standardized testing.

One of the most glaring ethically wrenching complexities presented in this book are the disagreements over who the movement “is for”, and whose voice matters the most, a complexity which can impede collective action. At the time of the book’s publication the Opt Out movement consisted of little more than parents and teachers vehemently opposed to standardized testing. The only other education-based allies consisted largely of conservative soccer moms—a narrative reformers promoted by “bending the ear” of the mainstream media to advocate the idea that opting out was simply a naïve game played by privileged White mothers (see Ravitch, 2013). *United Opt Out* has consistently rejected that claim. Ceresta Smith’s chapter on “Changing the Narrative” summarizes the point of view of UOO, which is that while opting out might benefit White children

of privilege, and attract suburban soccer moms, opting out *as a movement* (rather than a singular act) is necessary for the transformation of communities of color.

The second most painful complexity within this movement is how even those most harmed by the reform initiatives are often themselves either subject to false narratives or have been bought out by powerful interests. The challenges in addressing the NEA (see above and chapter five of the book) illustrate how union leadership or the National Association of Colored Persons (NAACP) might be more aligned with corporate interests than the needs of their own members.

Why might some individuals and groups resist opting out? Some advocates of educational equity are convinced that standardized testing is a civil right—the best and only way to academically level the playing field for low-income children and children of color (The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, 2015). In some capacity, this rationale seems to make sense—we live in a society that historically has been oppressive and operating within the dominant system we can, with hard work, achieve what has been denied us. Others, such as teachers and principals who day after day see and experience the negative effects of standardized testing may indeed want to advocate opting out to their students and parents, but fear repercussions (Taylor, 2016). For these individuals, opting out can serve as a powerful voice of support for ethical quality teaching and learning in public schools. At the same time, it can expose these individuals to potential risk in terms of job security, threats to safety, and humiliation or condemnation by others. Parents and children may also face punitive action that could deter them from participating in the movement: excluding students from field trips and extracurricular activities, forcing parents to enroll children in summer school or remediation courses regardless of ability, denying grade promotions or advanced course placement, and receiving scholarships or diplomas. Understanding the motivations and circumstances of those who support, or do not support, opting out is essential to ensure that the movement is prepared to address these various perspectives, and the associated benefits or challenges they might present. *United Opt Out* is making it clear throughout their narrative that ultimately opting out is an act of civil disobedience and therefore those who join the fight must be prepared to break the rules and confront personal or professional consequences.

At the same time and beyond the scope of the book, *United Opt Out* has adapted with the shifting terrain of reform. Asking themselves again, “What are you for?” it has been clear to the UOO administrators that with the authorization of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015, that the answer to that question would have to shift as well. ESSA is introducing a range of new policies aimed at privatizing public schools, and as UOO leader Peggy Robinson (2016) has stated refusing the tests are no longer enough:

By pushing Opt Out – as a singular event – we are in essence doing exactly what the corporate regime wants us to do. We are playing right into their PR campaign. Ultimately, those who love to cash in on our public schools and our children have absolutely NO problem with getting rid of the end of the year test – they are more than happy to bring us a new form of testing. Truly. It’s co-optation at its finest.

United Opt Out has learned to negotiate the terrain of ‘unlikely allies’ as well as experiences with those groups that would want use the movement, illustrated for example by early attacks by homeschoolers, to advance their own agendas. This suggests that the journey toward justice in public education is not a straightforward path. It also demonstrates that national movements such as UOO can become tools manipulated by a range of profiteers with different and even competing goals. *United Opt Out* has also learned how to fully reject associations with conservative leaning opt out groups, e.g., alienating many of these groups by inviting Bill Ayers to the UOO 2015 Philadelphia conference as keynote speaker, and instead has created informal

partnerships with radical groups such as the Black Agenda Report. The narrative of social justice, perhaps immature and developing at the time in which they were writing the book, has now become the major, if not sole, focus of the UOO work.

With these considerations in mind, swimming upstream against the current of powerful interests UOO's goal is to be heard, not silenced, so it may not be surprising that some voices from the public are still not yet included in the call to action. Given the inability of high-stakes testing to assess meaningful learning and the damage that it has inflicted on quality teaching, it seems likely that the presence of UOO will only become more influential as public awareness, support, and action against this unjust assessment practice continues to grow nationally. As the work of *United Opt Out* moves forward, its ability to promote an increasingly greater public voice against high-stakes testing and corporate reform of public education, as well as to document the successes achieved and the venues in which they occur, can serve to consolidate these powerful forms of collective civic engagement for constructive educational change. Work in these areas has the potential to lead to positive changes in commercial media distortion of public education, ineffective school policy decisions which undermine quality teaching and learning, and the role of corporate reform in public education. This is more likely to occur as the greater public becomes informed of the manipulation of public education by political and corporate reformers, pushes back against those interests, and becomes an increasingly influential and growing collective for change that is *United Opt Out*.

At the same time, we also should remain cognizant of where and for whom these potential “changes” will occur and their implications for social justice and urban schools. Additionally, beyond the issue of high-stakes testing, and consistent with its call to hold America accountable for the promise of public education, UOO should consider its commitment to the

- provision of a rich and layered curriculum for active student learning,
- support for school environments that respect and treat teachers as professionals,
- recognition of students as active, creative, and critically engaged learners, and
- construction of classrooms where students identify, share, and develop a context for learning that becomes transformational.

These issues and the efforts mentioned earlier could be shared in a welcomed second volume of published work.

An Activist Handbook for the Education Revolution: United Opt Out's Test of Courage successfully weaves together the convictions and actions of activist educators determined to make a difference for all children in our public schools. It is an important book not only for those interested in learning more about the *United Opt Out* movement, but for those dedicated to social justice and change. Far too often our democratic ideals and the value of those ideals are compromised for corporate interests. This book makes a powerful case for why we must challenge the privatization and corporate take-over of our public schools as well as how to go about doing just that. By doing so, the edited volume serves as a valuable resource for all individuals committed to preserving and furthering the intention of democracy and the possibilities of activism to ensure free and equitable public education.

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