

# Testing capitalism: Perpetuating privilege behind the masks of merit and objectivity

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*The accountability paradigm for reforming public schools began in the U.S. as a state-based initiative grounded in establishing state standards for core content and developing high-stakes tests and schedules to hold schools, teachers, and students accountable (Hout and Elliott, 2011). This essay examines the test-based patterns of that paradigm over the past thirty years by confronting testing as a mechanism of surveillance (Foucault, 1984) and then examining the accountability era in South Carolina as an example of the power and failure of accountability based on tests. Tests remain powerful, I contend, because they reinforce the investment-and-return vernacular that reflects and reinforces Americans' faith in capitalism over democracy.*

*Keywords: capitalism, high-stakes testing, accountability, democracy, United States*

## TESTING CAPITALISM — PERPETUATING PRIVILEGE BEHIND THE MASKS OF MERIT AND OBJECTIVITY

During his Listening and Learning tour, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (2009) claimed: “Whether it’s in rural Alaska or inner-city Detroit, everyone everywhere shares a common belief that education is America’s economic salvation.” Then, he added the “no excuses” and idealistic characterization about schools: those people at the tour events, Duncan claims, “...see education as the *one true path* [emphasis added] out of poverty—the great equalizer that overcomes differences in background, culture and privilege. It’s the only way to secure our common future in a competitive global economy” (n.p.).

Duncan’s assertions are compelling in popular discourse and more than mere political rhetoric since they represent the market-based ideologies upon which the education policy of the U.S. are built: federal policy that has evolved from the accountability era first spawned in state governments in the early 1980s after the release of “A Nation at Risk.” Central to that accountability era has been the combination of standards and high-stakes testing, about which Duncan (2009) admitted: “Many teachers complain

bitterly about NCLB's emphasis on testing." Yet, Duncan remained steadfast in this possibility: "Until states develop better assessments—which we will support and fund through Race to the Top—we must rely on standardized tests to monitor progress—but this is an important area for reform and an important conversation to have" (n.p.).

At the state and federal levels in the U.S., the accountability era is trapped in a perpetual faith in better tests, resulting in failure to challenge the effectiveness and appropriateness of test-based accountability. Two decades into the state-based accountability era and just before No Child Left Behind (NCLB) shifted accountability to the federal government, Stanley Aronowitz, writing in the introduction to *Pedagogy of Freedom* (Freire, 1998), identified the dynamic personified by Duncan:

As good jobs disappear and are replaced by temporary, contingent, and part-time work, competition among prospective workers intensifies. The school responds by making testing the object of teaching and, in the bargain, robs teachers of their intellectual autonomy, not to say intellectual function. As education is suppressed and replaced by training, students learn that critical consciousness is dangerous to the end of techno-scientific formation because it may jeopardize their chance for a job, let alone a career. Critical educators may be admired but dismissed as propagandists.... After all, even the most conservative cultures require self-justification by picking out a few subalterns to promote as emblems of the system's flexibility. (p. 15)

Duncan, as "subaltern," personifies and advocates for neoliberal commitments to testing by rejecting testing—all couched in civil rights rhetoric, his progressive mask that hides his full investment in capitalism as the dominant cultural norm in the U.S.

A parallel potential subaltern is Paul Proteus in Kurt Vonnegut's (1952) *Player Piano*. Paul is groomed within Vonnegut's dystopian society where everyone is labeled by I.Q. testing to perform her or his proper function in society: "It was a matter of record. Everyone's I.Q., as measured by the National Standard General Classification Test, was on public record—in Ilium, at the police station" (p. 89). However, the difference between fiction and reality is that Vonnegut has Paul confront the system that creates him while Duncan embraces and perpetuates the test-based education machine that feeds corporate America and the capitalism Americans worship.

The accountability paradigm built on scripted curriculum and high-stakes testing can be traced back in the U.S. to the Committee of Ten in the 1890s. Soon after the Committee established goals and standards for high schools to prepare better students for college (Report, 1894), the early twentieth century saw humanists (core curriculum advocates) and efficiency educators (standardized test idealists) win the battle for the American curriculum (Kliebard, 1995). Throughout the mid and late 1900s, then, the inevitable occurred first as state-based accountability after the release of the popularly and politically corrupt "A Nation at Risk" (Bracey, 2003; Holton, 2003), and then as federal accountability in the form of NCLB. After a decade of NCLB, the Obama

administration has raised the stakes even higher as test-scores have moved beyond school and student accountability to teacher evaluation and pay, and, as Duncan promised, now supports the move to better tests under a better set of standards, Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

In the historically impoverished Deep South of the U.S., South Carolina (SC) has responded to all of these articulations of the same technocratic paradigm by intensifying the state's investment in the SAT as well as in state-based standards and high-stakes testing. The irony of SC's early and intense commitments to testing is that test data have historically painted the state as a failed education system, masking the corrosive impact of inequity and poverty at the root of those national and state test scores.

Below, I examine the role of testing as surveillance and control (Foucault, 1984) as it has manifested itself in SC during thirty years of high-stakes accountability. The state's investment in, and commitment to testing, standards, and accountability reveal the direct and indirect consequences of testing that perpetuate capitalistic ideals at the expense of democracy, equity, and opportunity.

For the purposes of this discussion, testing is couched inside America's guiding ethos, capitalism. Throughout, I use "capitalism" as more than an economic system and as the ideology encompassing a variety of assumptions that remain unacknowledged and unchallenged in the U.S.: competition, choice, external motivation, rugged individualism, and the Invisible Hand of the market. Engel (2000) notes "it is nothing short of disastrous that more than ever before, one antidemocratic system of ideas—market ideology—almost exclusively defines the terms of educational politics and charts the path of education reform" (p. 3). More than a decade later, Engel's assessment remains an accurate description of the central and corrosive place for testing as it feeds a commitment to capitalism while eroding the promise of democracy, as Engel adds:

...[I]deology is important in understanding educational change.... Ideology is nonetheless often overlooked or at best misapplied by mainstream social scientists as a factor in politics. This is due in part to the dominance of quantitative methodologies in political science, which leads to the trivialization of the concept into conveniently measurable but irrelevant labels.... Market ideology has triumphed over democratic values not because of its superiority as a theory of society but in part because in a capitalist system it has an inherent advantage. (pp. 8-9)

### **THE EXPANDED TEST CULTURE—"THE AGE OF INFINITE EXAMINATION"<sup>1</sup>**

Political and popular discourse tends to conflate the broad and varied forms of assessment under the term "test," but the differences between teacher-created

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1 Adapted in part from Thomas, P. L. (2011b, August 8). Poverty and testing in education: "The present scientifico-legal complex." *The Daily Censored*. <http://dailycensored.com/2011/08/08/poverty-and-testing-in-education-%E2%80%99Cthe-present-scientifico-legal-complex%E2%80%9D/>

classroom assessments that support teaching and learning (generally noted as formative assessment), and high-stakes standardized tests aligned with standards are profound. Here, the rise and power of high-stakes testing within the accountability paradigm are examined through the lens of power and surveillance (Foucault, 1984) as a foundation for exploring how testing has failed education policy in South Carolina as one representative example of the larger failure of committing to high-stakes testing throughout the U.S.

The history of power, who attains privilege and why, is one of creating leverage for the few at the expense of the many. To achieve that privilege, often those with economic (and thus political) power have resorted to explicit and wide-scale violence as well as fostering the perception that those with power have been chosen, often by the gods or God, to lead. The narrative reads, Power is taken *and* deserved. Justifications such as “God chose me” and “God told me” endure in many cultures, but in a secular culture with ambiguous attitudes toward violence (keep the streets of certain neighborhoods *here* crime-free, but drone-wars in other countries are freedom fighting) such as the U.S., the ruling elite needed a secular god—thus, the rise of science, objectivity, and testing:

[A] correlative history of the modern soul and of a new power to judge; a genealogy of the present scientifico-legal complex from which the power to punish derives its bases, justifications, and rules; from which it extends its effects and by which it masks its exorbitant singularity. (Foucault, 1984, p.170)

Although standardized testing remains a reflection of the inequity gap in society<sup>2</sup> (Thomas, 2011d) and the high-stakes testing movement has not reformed education or society, the persistent call for even more testing of students as well as increased testing based on CCSS (and used to evaluate and dismiss teachers) must have a purpose other than the civil rights claims by the political and corporate elite who are most invested in the test-culture in the U.S; for example, Secretary Duncan repeatedly calls education reform “the Civil Rights issue of our time.” That purpose, as with the persistence of poverty, is to maintain the status quo of a hierarchy of power/privilege and to give that hierarchy the appearance of objectivity, of science. As I will detail below, standards, testing, and accountability are the new gods of the political and corporate elite who both endorse and benefit from capitalism.

Schools in the U.S. are designed primarily to create compliant children, to be compliant workers (Thomas, 2011c); much of what we say and consider about education is

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2 See Di Carlo (2010): “But in the big picture, roughly 60 percent of achievement outcomes is explained by student and family background characteristics (most are unobserved, but likely pertain to income/poverty). Observable and unobservable schooling factors explain roughly 20 percent, most of this (10-15 percent) being teacher effects. The rest of the variation (about 20 percent) is unexplained (error). In other words, though precise estimates vary, the preponderance of evidence shows that achievement differences between students are overwhelmingly attributable to factors outside of schools and classrooms”

related to discipline—classroom management is often central to teacher preparation and much of what happens during any school day:

The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible. (Foucault, 1984, p. 189)

In education reform, the surveillance of students, and now the surveillance of teachers, is not covert, but in plain view in the form of tests and the resulting test data. Relying on tests and test scores for accountability allows that surveillance to be disembodied from those students and teachers (and thus to appear objective) and examined as if a reflection of merit.

Testing as surveillance in order to create compliance is central to maintaining capitalism's hierarchies of power both within schools (where a premium is placed on the compliance of students and teachers) and society (where well-trained and compliant voters and workers sustain the positions of those in power):

[T]he art of punishing, in the regime of disciplinary power, is aimed neither at expiation, nor precisely at repression.... It differentiates individuals from one another, in terms of the following overall rule: that the rule be made to function as a minimal threshold, as an average to be respected, or as an optimum toward which one must move. It measures in quantitative terms and hierarchizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, the "nature" of individuals.... The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institution compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*. (Foucault, 1984, p. 195)

The political and corporate elites in the U.S. have risen to their status of privilege within the "scientifico-legal complex" (Foucault, 1984, p. 170) that both created, and is then perpetuated by that elite. In capitalism's free market, the winners always believe the rules of the game are fair and will work to maintain the rules that have produced their privilege.

Foucault (1984) identifies testing as a central mechanism within the power dynamic that produces a hierarchy of authority (in the U.S., capitalism), delineating those in privilege from those trapped in poverty: "The examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of normalizing judgment. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes possible to qualify, to classify, and to punish" (p. 197). Thus, as the rise of market paradigms to replace democratic paradigms has occurred in the U.S. over the last century, notably within the education reform agenda (Engel, 2000), we can observe a rise in the prominence of testing along with the uses those tests. From the early decades of the twentieth century, testing in the U.S. has gradually increased and expanded in its role for labeling and sorting students; in fact, the education reform movement driven by "No Excuses" Reform (NER) ideology has masked as confronting the status quo the perpetuating and intensifying of the test-based status quo (see Table

1 below). For example, in the twenty-first century, testing is now being leveraged to control teachers, expanding from the early accountability movement that incorporated test scores to control students and dictate school quality.

**Table 1. “No Excuses” Reform paradigm perpetuates and intensifies status quo of public education problems.**

<b>Public School Problem</b>	<b>“No Excuses” Reform</b>
Poor, Latino/Black, special needs, and ELL students assigned disproportionately inexperienced and un-/under-certified teachers	Assign poor, Latino/Black, special needs, and ELL students Teach for America recruits (inexperienced and uncertified)
Public schools increasingly segregated by race and socioeconomic status	Charter schools, segregated by race and socioeconomic status
Three decades of standards-based testing and accountability to close the test-based achievement gap	Common Core State Standards linked to new tests to create a standards-based testing and accountability system
Inequitable school funding that rewards affluent and middle-class schools in affluent and middle-class neighborhoods and ignores or punishes schools in impoverished schools/neighborhood	Drain public school funding for parental choice policies that reinforce stratification found in those parental choices
State government top-down and bureaucratic reform policies that ignore teacher professionalism	Federal government top-down and bureaucratic reform policies that ignore teacher professionalism
Rename high-poverty schools “academy” or “magnet” schools	Close high-poverty public schools and open “no excuses” charters named “hope” or “promise” [see above]
Ignore and trivialize teacher professionalism and autonomy	Identify as “bad” and fire experienced teachers and replace with inexperienced and uncertified TFA recruits [see above]
Poor, Latino/Black, special needs, and ELL students assigned disproportionately to overcrowded classrooms	Poor, Latino/Black, special needs, and ELL students assigned to teachers rewarded for teaching 40-1 student-teacher ratio classrooms

Public School Problem	“No Excuses” Reform
Poor, Latino/Black, special needs, and ELL students tracked into test-prep classrooms	Poor and Latino/Black students segregated into test-prep charter schools; special needs and ELL students disregarded (left for public schools to address—see column to the left)
Teacher preparation buried under bureaucracy at the expense of content and pedagogy	Teacher preparation rejected at the expense of content and pedagogy
Presidents, secretaries of education, governors, and state superintendents of education misinform and mishandle education	Presidents, secretaries of education, governors, and state superintendents of education (most of which have no experience as educators) misinform and mishandle education
Fail to acknowledge the status quo of public education (see above): Public schools reflect and perpetuate the inequities of U.S. society	Fail to acknowledge the status quo of public education (see above and the column to the left): NER reflect and perpetuate the inequities of U.S. society

Those in power committed to testing *to control students and teachers* claim that tests are a mechanism for achieving goals of democracy, meritocracy, and individual freedom, but in both cases, those claims mask implementing tests as the agent of capitalism (science, objectivity, accountability) to justify the current hierarchy of power—not to reform society or education: “[T]he age of the ‘examining’ school marked the beginnings of a pedagogy that functions as science” (Foucault, 1984, p. 198). Foucault, in fact, identifies three ways that testing works to reinforce market-based power dynamics, as opposed to providing data for education reform driven by a pursuit of social justice.

First, testing individual students and using test data to identify individual teacher quality create a focus on the individual that reinforces disciplinary purposes:

In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of their being constantly seen. . .that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection. And the examination is the technique by which power. . .holds them in a mechanism of objectification. (Foucault, 1984, p. 199)

Testing as discipline resonates in President Obama’s first term as Secretary Duncan simultaneously criticizes the misuse of testing in NCLB and calls for an expansion of testing, resulting in the U.S. “...entering the age of infinite examination and of compulsory objectification” (Foucault, 1984, p. 200).

Next, testing has sustained the hierarchy of power: High-stakes standardized testing insures “the calculation of gaps between individuals, their distribution in a given ‘population’” (Foucault, 1984, p. 202). Testing, in effect, does not provide data for addressing an equity/opportunity gap. Rather, testing has *created* achievement gaps, labeling those gaps and marginalizing those below the codified level of standard. What tends to be ignored in the testing debate as it impacts those trapped in the powerlessness and silence of poverty is that some people with authority determine what is taught, how that content is taught, what is tested, and how that testing is conducted. *In short, all testing is biased and ultimately arbitrary in the context of who has authority over norms labeled as “standards.”*

And finally, once the gaps are created and labeled by stratifying students and teachers: “[I]t is the individual as he/[she] may be described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his/[her] very individuality; and it is also the individual who has to be trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc.” (Foucault, 1984, p. 203). Within the perpetual education and education reform debates, the topics of poverty and testing are central themes, but we too often ignore the dynamic that exists between poverty and testing. *Testing marks poverty and inequity, but cannot eradicate them—although misusing the data perpetuates both.*

The test-based accountability paradigm, then, builds a contradictory mechanism that creates, identifies, and perpetuates gaps maintaining the status quo of stratified power in a market paradigm. The reality of that perverse paradigm is captured in the state of South Carolina and its corrosive relationship with the SAT and state-based accountability.

## **SOUTH CAROLINA RE-INVESTS IN THE SAT—GUARANTEEING FAILURE**

South Carolina and the SAT have a long and dysfunctional relationship. For decades, SAT data reported in the media have painted a picture of SC being *one* of the (if not *the*) weakest state education system in the U.S. Despite the College Boards’ eventual call for the media, educators, and the public to stop ranking schools by average SAT scores (Guidelines, 2011), the ranking and harsh judgment of SC schools persist. And what has SC’s response been? Endless re-investment in SAT test-preparation.

The political, public, and media narratives about SC school quality and its relationship with test data broadly and annual SAT average scores specifically have some important givens that are compelling in their simplicity and misleading due to that simplicity, including the following:

- Test scores are an accurate and direct representation of student learning, teacher effectiveness, school quality, and state-wide education system quality.



- SAT average scores for an entire state are valid data points for a variety of claims about educational quality that are easily compared from year to year and among states.
- Any problematizing of these assumptions or detailed and complex explanations of how these misguided and misleading assumptions are efforts to mask the failures of the system and to preserve the status quo of public education and its monopolistic avoiding of accountability.

A powerful example of why and how these narratives endure can be seen by considering a state-by-state comparison of SAT scores among SC, North Carolina (NC), and Mississippi (MS). First, let's consider these data points in the simple and decontextualized ways commonly experienced in political, public, and media representations of the scores. SC, NC, and MS appear easily and fairly comparable school systems. Most people would assume that these three states are similar since they are southern states with significant poverty and high percentages of racial minorities. Yet when composite average SAT scores for 2011 are examined—SC (1436), NC (1475), MS (1660)—a simple comparison shows SC lower than neighboring NC, and both SC and NC significantly below MS, by 124 and 85 points respectively.

Working within the assumptions above, what we may call *conventional wisdom*, SC has a failed education system, the newest SAT data each year confirming that historical fact. The power of testing broadly and of the SAT more narrowly (although the singular and narrow purpose of the SAT, predicting freshman college success, is never framed against the popular use of the test to claim educational quality of an entire school or school system) is reinforced, and perpetuated, as long as the data *appear to confirm assumptions* such as the weakness of the school system in SC. Yet, when more data are introduced and the causal relationships of contexts beyond the school are included in order to draw more complex and nuanced conclusions, test data suddenly aren't as eagerly embraced by politicians, the public, and the media.

Consider SAT average scores by the same states, but with additional data points for a more complex context (see Table 2): SAT participation rates (thus complicating the comparison of populations of students) along with percentages of test takers by the courses students elected to take in order to be prepared for the SAT (Advanced Placement [AP]<sup>3</sup> and honors courses in ELA and math).

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3 AP courses are provided through schools and administered by the College Board to allow students to receive college credit while in high school.

**Table 2. SAT data, poverty rates<sup>4</sup>, and courses taken for 2011. (CR = critical reading; M = math; W = Writing)**

State	Poverty Rate	2011 SAT CR	2011 SAT M	2011 SAT W	2011 SAT Composite	2011 SAT Participation Rate	AP/ Honors ELA %	AP/ Honors M %
SC	17%	482	490	464	1436	64%	45%	40%
NC	17%	493	508	474	1475	64%	61%	51%
MS	23%	564	543	553	1660	3%	64%	51%

Throughout the last thirty years of high-stakes accountability, advocates for public education and special interests more concerned with overhauling significantly or even supplanting public schools share the use of SAT data to establish evidence for their agendas, both starting with the narrative that public schools continue to fail. In SC, political advocates for and against public schools are indistinguishable. Thus, scholarly and public efforts to note that SC and MS SAT scores are functions of participation rates and curriculum decisions made by students and their parents (see Table 2) (and not evidence of whole system quality or even the quality of an individual school) fall on deaf ears all along the political and public spectrum.

Under Republican and Democratic leadership, in fact, SC has made overly simplistic SAT-based decisions (e.g., increasing student access to test-preparation software and courses in the traditional school curriculum, for example) concerning the education system and committed huge amounts of funding and classroom time to policies that could only increase the negative fallout of SAT scores: specifically, the state dedicated funds for students taking the PSAT, SAT-prep courses and software in the schools, and faculty to *increase* the number of students taking the SAT. These policies ignored the essential issue of participation rates (SC’s average SAT scores are drawn from a population closer to the norm of SC students than the unique and elite population of students in MS taking the SAT; in other words, average SAT scores in MS *should* be higher than in SC) as well as the larger statistical fact: by increasing the population of SC students taking the SAT and thereby moving that population even closer to the norm, the average SAT score had to *decrease*.

This dysfunctional relation between the SAT and SC is typical of how most of the U.S. misunderstands, misinterprets, and re-invests in testing while ignoring

4 Poverty rates are designated by federal government guidelines and based on Census data: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/>; 2011 SAT data available from the College Board: <http://research.collegeboard.org/programs/sat/data/archived/cb-seniors-2011>

the possibility that *testing itself is the problem*. However, the SAT/SC dynamic examined above is just one narrow example of the wider commitment to state-based testing as part of the accountability system in SC that is also presented to the public as the only and best way to reform public schools.

### **EARLY AND OFTEN—SOUTH CAROLINA’S SELF-DEFEATING ACCOUNTABILITY**

In the fall of 1984, I entered public education as a teacher. This was the beginning of high-stakes accountability in SC where then-Governor Richard Riley represented the new education leadership in the U.S., in which governors were the public and political leaders in education discourse and reform. Concurrent with the release of “A Nation at Risk,” SC created its accountability system built on state standards and periodic high-stakes testing—the first being the Basic Skills Assessment Program (BSAP), including a high-stakes exit exam for graduation. The paradigm is one that would become familiar throughout the U.S. over the next thirty years: (1) the state department of education convenes a committee to create state standards for core content areas (primarily math and English/language arts), (2) the state designs high-stakes tests based on those standards, and (3) the state creates a series of high-stakes mechanisms for holding schools, students, and teachers accountable for meeting those standards: school report cards, benchmarks for student achievement, gatekeeping tests for graduation, and punitive mechanisms for reforming schools with several years of underachievement.

SC entered this era among the first states, and over the next thirty years was identified as a “high rigor” state *and* as a state with stagnant scores (both in-state and national) because those two conditions fed each other (SC’s high-stakes state test scores repeatedly were as low as SC’s national test scores on National Assessment of Educational Progress [e.g., NAEP]<sup>5</sup>). And thus, SC has fostered a parallel dysfunctional relationship with the accountability era that is essentially like its investment in the SAT.

The pattern of repeatedly re-investing in the accountability paradigm and the discourse surrounding it can best be seen in the cycle that the accountability era spawned and the claims that recur throughout those cycles. First, the call for higher accountability based on prescribed curriculum (standards) and high-stakes standardized testing has become a claim that is its own evidence. In other words, political, media, and popular claims that schools in SC and all across the U.S. are failing is a given that is almost never examined, and then concurrently, accountability is also a given that is expressed as simultaneous claim and evidence: accountability is the solution to educational problems because accountability is a panacea, goes the circular political and popular reasoning that achieves its logic within the American ethos, capitalism.

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5 NAEP is a federally governed testing system that periodically assesses a random sampling of students across the U.S. to facilitate national comparisons of educational quality: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>

Next, the accountability paradigm grounded in standards and testing has never been framed against identifying the primary problems at the root of defined failures of public schools in SC. Also, the state has garnered a disturbing and problematic relationship with the term “Corridor of Shame” (Ferillo, 2006)—which grew out of a documentary examining a law suit by impoverished school districts demanding essential funding for all schools in SC. The term “Corridor of Shame” is important for understanding the failure of the accountability paradigm in SC and across the U.S. because it identifies both the possibility of authentic reform and simultaneously perpetuates the misguided accountability/standards/testing reform paradigm that has occurred for thirty years.

In its essence, “Corridor of Shame” (Ferillo, 2006) highlights the central role of social and educational inequity that is the source of most educational failure. Schools in SC that sit in deeply impoverished sections of the state, primarily along the I-95 corridor<sup>6</sup> from which the documentary title and phrase is coined, also produce measurable student outcomes that are routinely labeled failures on the state’s school report cards. To confront inequitable school funding and the historical and current realities that high-poverty students and their schools have outcomes reflecting that inequity would be a revolutionary shift in viewing school quality and school reform; and that is one possibility that the term “Corridor of Shame” offers, but an option that would require confronting capitalism as well.

Instead, the test data, school report cards, teacher characteristics, school conditions, and graduation rates associated with the “Corridor of Shame” are all used in the political and public discourse about schools and the policies that come from that discourse to keep the political, media, and public gaze on the schools, the teachers, and the students—not the inequity. SC, the narrative goes, is proof of school and teacher failure: the failure of effort, the failure of possibility, the failure of the schools and teachers to ask enough of their students to lift each child up by her or his bootstraps and walk out of their lives of poverty. That process, then, serves capitalism, not democracy.

*More* accountability, *different* standards, and *more* tests are assumed as necessary to wipe away the plight of shame that plagues the corridor of poverty that cuts through the state of SC. Thus, the second decade of the twenty-first century in SC is little different than the 1980s, and little different than the pattern characterizing the time in between. The standards created in the 1980s have been revised multiple times, and yet, SC now is poised to implement the adopted Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Not a single discussion has occurred, not a single study has been conducted about whether or not standards are *one of the* or *the* primary problem at the root of low student outcomes. New and thus better standards are promoted as the solution without ever identifying the problem.

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6 The interstate highway, I-95, bisects the state of SC from the north-east corner toward the south-west border and tends to represent a division between the more affluent western area of the state and the highly-impoverished coastal region.

Concurrent with periodically adopting different standards has been an endless stream of changing high-stakes tests—BSAP, PACT, PASS<sup>7</sup>. However, SC has failed to discuss or examine whether the tests themselves (or the absence of testing) are in some way contributing to the problems schools are facing. In fact, virtually no one in leadership, the media, or the public ever notes that regardless of the standards or tests, students in relative affluence continue to score well and students in poverty still struggle. When standards and testing are held constant, affluence and poverty are exposed (just as the “Corridor of Shame” phenomenon shows) as the primary sources of failures reflected in the schools.

SC has embraced CCSS and is creating high-stakes tests for the new standards. As well, the state has actively considered value-added methods (VAM) for increasing teacher accountability (again without asking whether or not teacher accountability is the problem) and implementing new systems for rating schools (replacing labels such as “at-risk” with an A-F letter system). When the accountability paradigm doesn’t work (Hout and Elliott, 2011), SC is the model of insanity (Thomas, 2012b) that is the cancer destroying both school reform and public schools.

*More* and *different* become the walls behind which SC refuses to look for authentic problems and different paradigms for reform. SC’s “Corridor of Shame” is an intensified example of the broader problems facing the state and all public education in the U.S.: public schools are failing by reflecting and perpetuating inequity of opportunity. Test data are not, then, valid metrics for school, teacher, or student quality. Test data are metrics that reflect primarily affluence and poverty in the lives of children, the learning conditions of the classroom, and the opportunities found in schools (Berliner, 2009, 2013; Hirsch, 2007). However, confronting social and educational inequity would require confronting capitalism, a venture no one in the U.S. seems willing to risk.

The concept of school quality is trapped in the accountability paradigm in SC and across the U.S. as a subset of the larger capitalism ethos that drives all U.S. thought and behavior. In this paradigm, teaching and learning are simply matters of transferring knowledge from the teacher to the student—the “banking concept” of teaching and learning (Freire, 1993)—and schools are therefore plants that must be managed like any factory, requiring ever increasing surveillance through authoritarian management, constant measurement, and perpetual analysis of that data for greater efficiency (Callahan, 1962; Foucault, 1984). Teaching and learning decisions and practices are built on test data and thus teaching to the test becomes only a matter of investment and return—simple calculations of decontextualized (and dehumanizing) data.

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7 SC’s state assessment system has included Basic Skills Assessment Program, Palmetto Achievement Challenge Tests, and Palmetto Assessment of State Standards since BSAP legislation was passed in 1978.

## MISGUIDED ANGER OVER FLORIDA AND VIRGINIA—HIGH-STAKES TESTS ARE THE PROBLEM

The education situation in SC is a snapshot of a larger national disease in the U.S. As long as discourse and policy force the public gaze to remain on metrics such as test scores and drop-out rates, political and corporate leadership can successfully continue to ignore poverty and inequity by constantly referring to it (Thomas, 2012c). After three decades of accountability driven by endless cycles of new standards and new tests, two phenomena capture the logical and corrosive conclusions being reached in the accountability era of testing and teaching to the tests committed to capitalism and not democracy: fears of failing top students and education policy implementing race-based proficiency rates for students.

First, consider stirring the fear of parents and the public over education failing top students (Thomas, 2011a) by Levine (2012), writing in *The Wall Street Journal*. Levine represents the divisive strategy (Cody, 2012) inherent in NER by claiming that *even* the top students in the U.S. are far behind their international counterparts. While educators and scholars have made some progress towards emphasizing the negative impact of poverty and inequity on test-based evaluations of school, teacher, and student quality (Ridille, 2010), NER nevertheless employs compelling and inaccurate claims that allow reformers to avoid addressing the evidence about the powerful connection between poverty and low test scores by channeling middle-class and affluent parents' fears (and gaze) toward their own children.

As Bracey (2004) has shown, Levine's (2012) claim that top students score in the middle of international ranks is deeply distorted (U.S. elite students when compared to international elite students are at the top [Ridille, 2010] or at least in the top quarter [Thomas, 2012a]). Just as simplistic conclusions drawn from test data are compelling, ranking by those test scores (although almost always extremely misleading [Bracey, 2006, 2004]) is equally compelling, especially when combined with triggering middle-class fear connected with international competitiveness. Standardized test scores remain poor metrics for identifying school, teacher, and student quality as they continue to be biased by race, class, and gender (Santelices & Wilson, 2010; Spelke, 2005). As well, Bracey (2006, 2004) has explained and shown repeatedly that test-based ranking of countries has no clear positive or negative correlation with those countries' economic power or rankings.

Yet, as long as the discourse and policy remain driven by test data, the inherently biased use of that data persists and works politically. The second pattern is even more disturbing, but it represents the logical conclusion of misusing test scores: states have begun to adopt race-based goals for student proficiency. As Minnis (2012) notes about Florida:

Hailed as a "road map" for all public school students and approved by the Florida State of Education earlier this month, the plan sets goals in reading and math that sharply vary based on ethnic and socio-economic dynamics. By 2018, new

standards mandate that 90 percent of all Asian students, 88 percent of whites and 81 percent of Hispanics be proficient in reading, compared to just 74 percent of blacks.... Currently, about 20 states, including Washington D.C. and Virginia, have adopted similar policies. (n.p.)

Race-based proficiency goals highlight a few important points: (1) they acknowledge the existence of race and class bias in the tests, (2) they both highlight and mask the strong correlation between test scores and out-of-school factors, and (3) they trigger the wrong sorts of reactions to the policies (leading to concern over the specific policy and not the debate about the essential problem with high-stakes testing).

If we begin with a flawed commitment to the singular power of test data and if we allow the tests themselves to be beyond reproach, race-based proficiency goals are in many ways based on statistically solid evidence. However, reactions to the new race-based proficiency goals are extremely important to consider in order to understand both how tests are misused and why the focus on testing remains powerfully corrosive. Leonard Pitts, Jr., is a well-respected syndicated national columnist whose work is featured in *The Miami Herald*. As an African American voice confronting race and equity, Pitts presents a key reaction to the race-based proficiency rates and reveals several important elements. Note that Pitts (2012) remains fixed on the inherent “rigor” of test scores, even though his commentary opens with his own story of scoring low on the SAT (when compared to a fellow white student) and then doing well in college:

I’ve always suspected my modest SAT score and the fact that I was encouraged to celebrate it said less about me than about the expectations others had of me — and kids like me.... Last month, for example, Florida set a goal of having 86 percent of white kids at or above grade level in math by 2018. For black kids, the goal is 74 percent. Virginia is wrestling with similar standards.... The best analogy I can give you is based in the fact that some coaches and athletic directors have noted a steep decline in the number of white kids going out for basketball. They feel as if they cannot compete with their black classmates. What if we addressed that by lowering the rim for white kids? What if we allowed them four points for each made basket?... Because ultimately, you do not fix education by lowering the bar. You do it by lifting the kids. (n.p.)

While Pitts presents some compelling claims about equity, race, and opportunity, he remains committed to the tests themselves; in other words, Pitts is typical in his response throughout the U.S.—the race-based proficiency goals are racist outrages, but almost no one asks why we are using high-stakes tests to begin with, *tests that are also racist, classist, and sexist*.

In the context of the SAT, test-based school and teacher accountability, concerns about U.S. competitiveness internationally, the achievement of top students, and ever-evolving state policy related to student proficiency, high-stakes testing labels and perpetuates inequity, but it does not, and cannot erase inequity. Throughout the U.S., high-stakes standardized testing has proven to be corrosive to democratic goals

addressing equity; therefore, since testing endures, the only logical justification for those tests is that they perpetuate and reinforce the ethos of capitalism.

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Writing about the “cult of efficiency” at mid-twentieth century, Callahan (1962) recognized the inevitable power of capitalism as the pervasive paradigm for every aspect of America, including its public Commons:

For while schools everywhere reflect to some extent the culture of which they are a part and respond to forces within that culture, the American public schools, because of the nature of their pattern of organization, support, and control, were especially vulnerable and responded quickly to the strongest social forces.... The business influence was exerted upon education in several ways: through newspapers, journals, and books; through speeches at educational meetings; and, more directly, through actions of school boards. It was exerted by laymen, by professional journalists, by businessmen or industrialists either individually or in groups. . . , and finally by educators themselves. Whatever its source, the influence was exerted in the form of suggestions or demands that the schools be organized and operated in a more businesslike way and that more emphasis be placed upon a practical and immediately useful education....

The tragedy itself was fourfold: that educational questions were subordinated to business considerations; that administrators were produced who were not, in any true sense, educators; that a scientific label was put on some very unscientific and dubious methods and practices; and that an anti-intellectual climate, already prevalent, was strengthened. (pp. 1, 5-6, 246)

From the beginning of the accountability era in the early 1980s and up to the current education reform discourse surrounding concerns for top students, international comparisons, and race-based proficiency rates, the NER paradigm, depending as it does on misguided understanding and faith in high-stakes testing, reveals that education and education reform are committed to capitalism, not democracy. Test data allow a direct and manageable investment-and-return approach to guide evaluations of schools as well as claims about school effectiveness and policies for reform: if states have invested more tax dollars to public schools while test scores have remained flat or decreased, that is clearly a poor allocation of public funds, the narrative goes.

Within a capitalistic paradigm, then, test data are robust metrics that serve to perpetuate and reinforce misconceptions about teaching, learning, and equity. Although high-stakes tests are ineffective mechanisms for promoting equity or authentic learning, high-stakes tests are also powerful tools for keeping the gaze focused on individuals that a system needs marginalized and compliant. Just as Pitts (2012) moves to the edge of challenging the use of tests themselves and then backs away by relinquishing again all power to tests as the appropriate “bar,” political, media, and public discourse tends to start with test data and ends with conclusions about the U.S., state schools, teachers, and students while never questioning the test-based paradigm itself.



Capitalism as an amoral system of supply and demand as well as investment and return is being replicated in the U.S. public school system through the power of test- and standards-based accountability. This narrow and distorted application of “scientific” thinking exposes that test-based public education has been reduced to a myopic state, one represent in Vonnegut’s (1963) Dr. Felix Hoenikker in *Cat’s Cradle*:

For instance, do you know the story about Father [Felix Hoenikker] on the day they first tested a bomb out at Alamogordo? After the thing went off, after it was a sure thing that America could wipe out a city with just one bomb, a scientist turned to Father and said, “Science has now known sin.” And do you know what Father said? He said, “What is sin?” (p. 17)

Education reform has slipped into a similar stupor to Hoenikker’s, unable to question the tests themselves, blinded by the lure of capitalism that has eclipsed both the promise of democracy and the schools founded to support it.

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