

“People, Not Profits”: The Professional Organizations We Need

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Abstract

This article uses a scrapbook design to narrate the authors’ experiences protesting the use of high-stakes performance assessments in teacher preparation programs by engaging in demonstrations during—and proposing policy at—the annual conventions of a large national teachers’ organization. These narrations are used to raise questions about how professional education organizations define advocacy at a time when neoliberal education reforms limit educators’ capacity to carry out our collective responsibilities to marginalized and vulnerable youth. The authors suggest that in the current political climate that has dehumanized youth, demoralized their teachers, and disempowered teacher educators, educators need professional organizations that explicitly name injustices associated with the reductive curricula and for-profit tests that are hindering local teachers’ and teacher educators’ responsiveness to learners and engagement with democratic processes. In response to these injustices, the authors argue that teachers’ professional organizations must do far more to work boldly both against the de-professionalization of educators and toward a re-professionalization of educators that centers rather than marginalizes advocacy and activism.

Keywords: professional organizations, teacher activism, educational advocacy

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A Friday at the Annual Convention, 2015

We—members of a large national teachers' organization¹— were fired up and ready to go. A few dozen members of a social justice committee—mostly education graduate students and teacher education professors from across the United States— wanted to push back against the de-professionalization we see happening at every level of education. Tired of high-stakes tests, packaged curricula, and restrictive policies being required in lieu of meaningful responses to deep inequities, we wanted to question our complicity with the corporate giants who profit as our professional agency, expertise, and decision-making power diminish. We spent the day discussing scholarship; documenting the ways that Teacher Performance Assessments (TPAs) limit possibilities for meaningful, equity-oriented teacher education, particularly in working with marginalized or vulnerable students (e.g., Dover, Schultz, Smith & Duggan, 2015; Dover & Schultz, 2016; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016).

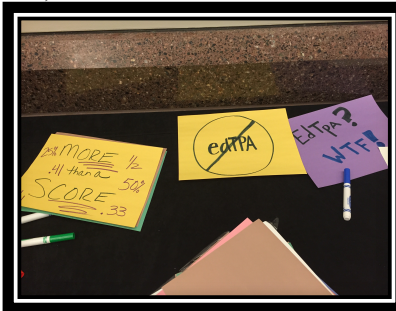


Figure 1. Protest signs created at the annual convention.

We listened to education reporter Valerie Strauss, a speaker at this convention, as she pointed out the ridiculous irony in that policymakers expect achievement and equity outcomes to emerge from deeply flawed, inequitable notions of accountability. We wanted to raise deeper questions while we gathered together at the conference, coming to participate from urban, suburban, and rural parts of our country. We asked ourselves: How can we carry out our responsibilities as justice-oriented teacher educators when our work is increasingly limited by reductive for-profit teacher candidate assessments? What does it mean for members to meet at a convention to work toward equitable education when Pearson—the largest multinational corporation in education and a prime driver of packaged assessments and curricula—is a sponsor that commands prime real estate in our professional organization's exhibit hall? Perhaps most urgently, what does our professional organization's relationship with Pearson mean for those of us who are fighting Pearson's influence on education policy? What does it mean for teacher educators who are questioning laws requiring pre-service teachers to pay a distant Pearson employee \$300 to make a certification decision based upon a brief video of their teaching rather than having such decisions made by teacher educators with vast, years-long, local knowledge? How do such relationships and policies impact our commitment to marginalized and vulnerable K-12 youth? To raise these questions, we marched through the convention's exhibit hall, beginning and ending near the Pearson area,

¹ We intentionally do not name the national teachers' professional organization as we see these issues going beyond any one specific organization.

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chanting “public school is not for sale,” “students, not tests,” “people, not profits,” and “hey-hey, ho-ho, Pearson has got to go.” We wore and carried signs reading “profits silence schools” and “Pearson: The new British colonialism” as we protested the UK-based corporation’s influence on educational policy and practice. The longer we marched,

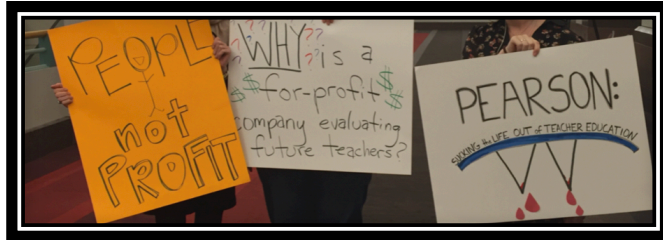


Figure 2. Signs held by protestors.

the bigger the protest became. Social media lit up with statements of support from the professional community and beyond. Two news blogs, including *Popular Resistance* (Stewart, 2015), quickly publicized the protest: Over 7,000 people in all 50 states and over 30 countries had viewed the post by the next morning. For that half hour of protest, we felt the satisfaction that comes with being heard and a sense of hope that our actions were raising awareness, could inspire others to engage in similar action, and, best of all, spark widespread policy change.

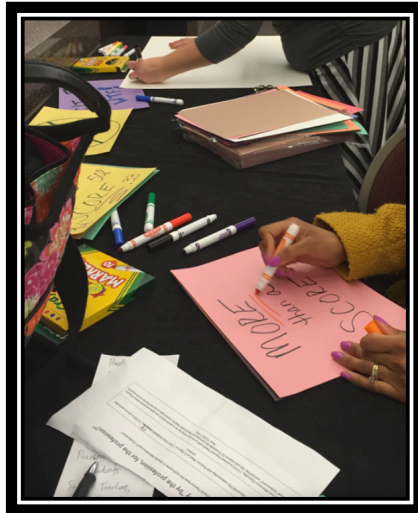


Figure 3. Protestors creating signs for their march.

Responses and Reflections

Higher-ups in our professional organization, however, were reportedly unhappy with our actions. Although we had spoken with security before starting to march and chant—informing them that we would be exercising our First Amendment rights in the exhibit hall space—we had not informed the organization’s leadership of our desire to protest. The rapidity with which we moved from listening to Valerie Strauss, to our committee meeting, and then to the exhibit hall prevented us from keeping senior members of our community in the loop—we openly acknowledge that this put some

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colleagues in an awkward position following the protest. Yet we do not regret the decision to raise these issues and to protest the de-professionalization of teachers and teacher educators. Our organization has a proud history of fighting for what is right, supporting—through resolutions if not direct actions—the Movement for Black Lives, ethnic studies curricula, critical media literacy in schools, and students’ right to use their heritage language(s) in school. In spite of these notable examples, we question why our leadership remains largely silent about the for-profit modes of de-professionalization that make educators’ work supporting students’ rights to their own language, ethnic studies curricula, or engagement with #BlackLivesMatter more difficult as we are pushed to teach, learn, and measure in narrowed or scripted ways. The party line is often that political activity or activism is not our charge, and that the focus of the organization’s conventions should simply be sharing research, resources, or creating spaces for professional collaboration. And yet, as we left the 2015 convention, we continued to wonder: What should an education organization do if its teacher members and their students are being harmed by legislation? Yet, it’s the organization’s 501(c)(3) status that allows it to be tax-exempt and prohibits it from being “an action organization . . . attempt[ing] to influence legislation” (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2019). Our initial response was to try to create awareness and change within the organization and to continue to protest.

After our first protest, we realized that although we wanted to focus on Pearson’s role in restricting meaningful and generative education, we also needed to focus on our organization’s role. As one colleague put it, Pearson is doing what it is designed to do: seeking out new markets and creating profits (Alison Dover, personal communication, November 22, 2015). And so, our question became: Why have teachers’ professional organization leaders remained silent or actively helped with these endeavors? We want teachers’ professional organizations to embrace their history and take a strong stance against the for-profit high-stakes tests that are currently reshaping K-12 and teacher education.

For this reason—and beginning just hours after our protest—we directed our momentum into crafting a resolution, following our organization’s process for members who want to create or shift an official policy or position of the organization. Members of the social justice committee drafted a resolution against high-stakes teacher performance assessments over the next few months, submitted it to the organization’s leadership, and prepared testimony to offer before the appropriate committees at the annual business meeting held at the next year’s convention. Finally, participants in the professional organization’s business meeting the following year voted on whether it would be added to the ballot for potential ratification by the entire membership. We and many other colleagues wanted our professional organization to take a strong stand against teacher de-professionalization.

A Friday at the 2016 Convention

After we offered our personal testimonies (e.g., Behizadeh, 2016) in support of our proposed resolution to a filled-to-capacity ballroom, our organization’s president asked—for the third time—if there was anyone present who wished to speak against the Resolution in Opposition to High-Stakes Teacher Candidate Performance Assessments.

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Not one member of the hundreds present came to the mic to speak against the resolution, which asserted that “high-stakes teacher candidate performance assessments . . . [are] a serious, imminent threat to . . . education and to the teaching profession as a whole” (CEE Commission on Social Justice in Teacher Education Programs, 2016, p.1). In support of the resolution, however, were more speakers than time permitted. One testified:

The edTPA is having negative consequences on the quality of the student-teaching experience . . . causing undue stress, interfering with relationship-building with mentor teachers, creating economic hardship, and perhaps most importantly, diverting attention from learning how to enact culturally sustaining and effective instruction.

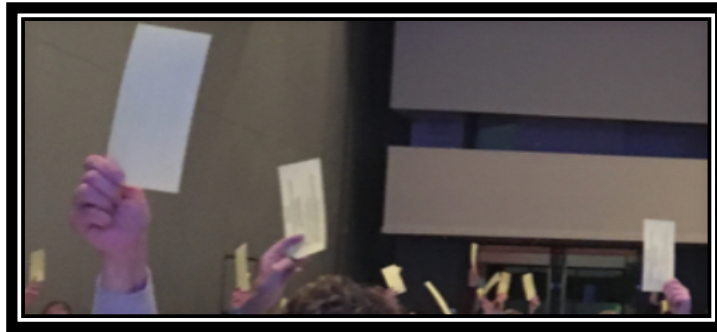


Figure 3. Committee members voting on the proposed resolution.

When the vote came, a sea of yellow tickets was held in the air in support of our resolution. No hands held yellow tickets in the air in opposition. Zero.

Following a vote by the entire membership a few months later, the professional organization announced that the resolution had been ratified by the membership and the leadership and had thus officially passed. This ratification and the fact that not one person spoke against the proposed resolution at the business meeting suggests that this resolution should not have been—indeed, was not—controversial. High-stakes assessments of teacher candidates are as problematic as high-stakes assessments of P-12 students: They are not in the interest of deep teaching and learning, improving opportunity, or working for equity in and through literacy education. But for too long, our organizations have maintained a neutral position on the neoliberal corporate reform movement and on teacher and teacher educator de-professionalization. The question is not why we protested and pushed our professional organization to take a strong stance on these important issues in the assault on education. Instead, we wondered: Why should we have had to do so? In other words, didn't our own organization incite our protest when it did not respond to our direct requests to fight these decisions, policies, and laws when they were in their formative stages back in 2014 (Department of Education, 2014)?

Responses and Reflections

Although we certainly see the passing of the Resolution in Opposition to High-Stakes Teacher Candidate Performance Assessments as a positive step, our enthusiasm is tempered by concern for the organization's transparency and willingness to put its members' interests above its financial interests. When we entered the giant ballroom for

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the business meeting where members voted to bring the resolution to the entire membership for possible ratification, we noticed that organization leaders had removed all references to edTPA on the printed copies of the proposed resolution—including in the title. Later, when we compared the version that we submitted and the version that appeared at the business meeting, we noticed major differences. The following arguments were removed from the official version disseminated at the meeting: (a) TPAs de-professionalize teacher education, (b) TPAs represent a troubling move toward privatization of education, and (c) our teachers' professional organization should encourage its members to engage in not only critical scholarship and teaching about TPAs but advocacy against them. We understood that resolutions are edited in committee but were dumbfounded by these differences and wondered: Why did the Committee on Resolutions make these edits? Did the organization's leadership know about and approve these edits? Why were submitters not permitted to approve edits—particularly when they were substantial rather than merely for consistency or style? Is this why submitters' identities were erased—because although they initiated the process, they lost control of the product? Why was the process taken over by others whose identities, roles, and moves were not made transparent? Finally, what interests or relationships caused the professional organization to remove these particular arguments?

A Saturday at the 2016 Convention

The theme of the 2016 annual conference claimed to champion the role of teachers in “pushing for change” and featured “everyday advocacy” sessions and opportunities so that members could make their voices heard. We approached the conference with excitement and hopefulness as we planned to build on the success of our previous year's protest and, again, take action to affect change. Three days before the annual conference, we emailed the organization's leadership to update them on our committee's work and, as requested, kept them in the loop by sharing that we “intend[ed] to distribute [a pamphlet summarizing our resolution] at the convention, possibly in conjunction with a peaceful protest, such as the staging of tableaux,” or statue-like postures illustrating our commitments. All major professional organization staff were immediately alerted to our plans; our mention of a possible protest clearly set off a far-reaching

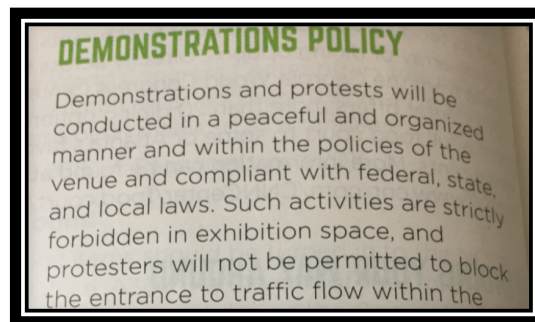


Figure 4. Demonstration policy that appeared in the conference's handbook. alarm system. We received a response from the staff that focused only on the protest, referring us to a page in the program book where a demonstrations policy now appeared. There were now extremely narrow “proper channels” to follow, prohibiting, for example,

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our original plans to create tableaux and distribute pamphlets in the lobby. We were emailed PDFs of “Designated Free Speech Areas,” almost all of which were outside the convention center. The exhibit hall, the site of our earlier protest of Pearson and TPAs, was explicitly mentioned as a space in which “such activities” were forbidden—making it clear that this space was only for corporate partners to sell their wares and not for members to question the effects of reductive curricula or for-profit tests. Over the next few days, we encountered so many barriers that our time and energy were spent trying to cut through the red tape rather than engaging in further planning. We wondered: In what ways might the new policy be a response to our previous year’s protest and/or the post-election political climate? If the professional organization named protests only in the exhibit hall as “strictly forbidden,” does that mean that it draws the line at everyday advocacy when members’ protest might impact the organization’s bottom line?

Responses and Reflections

Wrestling with the irony of the near-prohibition to engage in advocacy at a conference focused on advocacy, we tried to muster the energy to engage in the only form of protest we were finally allowed to conduct within the convention center: placing tape with messages about silencing and high-stakes testing on our bodies and opening up the activity to anyone who wanted to participate. Our posters tucked off to the side and our pamphlets back in a hotel room, we pre-made messages-on-tape, and passersby chose some for themselves or created their own. We wondered why several armed—armed!—security guards were sent to watch over the teachers’ professional organization members engaged in quiet advocacy at an annual convention focused on advocacy. Whose meeting was this? It didn’t feel like ours.

A Saturday at the 2019 Convention

We are not naïve. We realize that teachers’ professional organizations need funding, and that our organizing and conference costs cannot be covered by membership fees alone. Yet the question remains: Don’t corporate relationships compromise our ability to take a strong stand against the assault on public education, particularly the limitations to both teacher educator and teacher professionalism? Different levels of sponsorship come with benefits including convention attendee mailing lists, social media promotion, and logo placements. Don’t these corporate relationships also shape or limit teachers’ professional organizations’ educational politics and professional responses to, for example, PearsonVUE’s for-profit edTPA or Educational Testing Service’s Praxis Performance Assessment for Teachers? When we asked a longtime professional organization leader this question off the record, the response was an unequivocal “absolutely, yes.”

Here is our loving critique (Paris & Alim, 2014) of the professional organization we have supported for years and others like it. Teachers’ professional organizations have a blind spot, one that constitutes a vital social justice issue. This blind spot is the way corporate relationships and corporate sponsorship limit the ability of teacher leaders and activists both to name and carry out our collective responsibilities for meaningful opportunities in and through education. In neoliberal times, individual performance evaluations mask the impact of inequitable or diminishing resources, all while corporate

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profits soar. High-stakes accountability measures hinder justice work in and through education. Inequitable outcomes are framed in ways that demonize teachers and teacher educators—eschewing analysis of deep inequities in our society. Discourses on access and equity have themselves been co-opted by those seeking to profit from these inequities. In such a climate, we need the help of professional education organizations to disentangle these threads and fight for the education that teacher-candidates and K-12 learners deserve.

At a time when discrimination is intensifying, many teachers are overwhelmed as they work to support their students. We must reinvent our professional organizations as spaces through which we collectively take action to support students and their communities. We suggest that in the current climate, teachers' professional organizations must do far more to work boldly against the de-professionalization of educators and toward a re-professionalization of educators that centers rather than marginalizes advocacy and activism.

This work can be accomplished in many ways, including movement-building to amplify teachers' voices and decisively call out legislation that undermines teachers' agency and ability to support students and their communities. Valuing teacher professionalism can also take the form of cutting affiliations with entities that de-professionalize educators and reconfiguring professional meetings to prioritize members' ability to engage in what Freire (1970/2000) claimed is the only way "to no longer be prey to [oppression's] force," namely *praxis*, or "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 51). This work combats the de-professionalization of teachers and teacher educators by creating multiple and powerful spaces for them to participate in not only everyday advocacy but also exceptional activism.

Second, teachers' professional organizations must build stronger coalitions to extol the virtue of public education as a common good and to name and combat the privatization of schooling in its many forms. Teacher candidates and K-12 learners are not a for-profit market to be exploited. Although many teachers and teacher educators rage privately against the invasion of scripted curriculum and high-stakes standardized tests—and the loss of professional agency they cause—we are bound by laws and/or the fear of losing our jobs and thus often unable to speak out against privatization as freely as we might as a participant in a larger group. We need organizations that fight to protect educators' responsiveness to learners, use of humanizing pedagogies, demonstrations of agency, and engagement in democratic processes. We also need organizations that nurture strong relationships with equity-oriented policymakers and that activate members to work at local, state, and national levels toward equitable education.

Third, professional organizations can be reinvented by centering on advocacy and activism. With school resource inequities deepening, school re-segregation growing, teachers being villainized, and educational profiteering soaring, we can no longer settle for merely having a seat at the table. Instead, desperate times call for desperate measures: We need our organizations to get experienced public school teachers elected to public office. We must re-examine and adjust as necessary our partnerships as well as our organizational goals, and pursue only those goals that are in accordance with teachers' equity-oriented values and approved by members. As teachers from across the nation

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work together, we need to not only vote with our collective dollars but also withhold our dollars collectively when necessary.

If we want our classrooms to be public spaces in which students and teachers dialogue and collectively problem-solve pervasive and deep-seated issues in our communities and broader society, we must fight for a public education system that values this. If we want teachers and members of educational communities to be able to engage vital social movements (e.g., the Movement for Black Lives), educate against the xenophobia that dominates much of our current political moment, push for curricula that will respond to students' strengths and desires (e.g., ethnic studies curricula or the history of labor movements in the United States), or teach necessary skills for the 21st century (e.g., critical media and digital literacies), then teachers cannot be constrained by reductive policies and standards disconnected from lived realities. This work is essential to the role of educators at all levels—but cannot happen if our professional organizations are unwilling to take a stand and fight alongside teachers and teacher educators to make them a reality. It is on us to change our organizations or create new ones that can support us in this work.

Author Biographies

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