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BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

William J. Reese
Testing Wars in the Public Schools: A Forgotten History

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As a high school student in the late 1950s, I (and thousands of others) experienced the Ontario Grade 13 "Departmental Exams"—standardized exams which were sent out in sealed envelopes to high schools across the province, to be written at the same time everywhere (e.g. English Literature—Monday, June 9th, 9:00am, etc.). Our names were coded on our answer sheets, and they were sent to Toronto to be marked anonymously by teachers hired for the summer. Later in the summer we would receive in the mail a print-out of our results—and soon afterwards, a brochure would appear in the mailbox from our local Board of Education (a large suburb of Toronto), ranking all the schools in the district according to the percentage of exams passed. (For whatever reasons, individual students, classes or teachers were not identified in these brochures). University enrolment was based almost entirely on the results of these "Departmentals."

To this day, two specific memories stand out for me, in addition to the "nervousness and fright" (see below) that many of us suffered. First, some months before the end of term, on our sciences and maths teachers' instructions (five courses and five final exams), money would be collected from students and class sets of "Coles Reprints" purchased. These reprints were collections of all of the Departmental Exams from the previous twenty-five years. Then, for much of the rest of the year, each day's classes would consist of going over, in detail, all of the questions from one year's exam. My other memory pertains to the experience which a classmate suffered that year. Our French teacher had decided that he would probably not be successful in his exam at year's end and, clearly in collusion with school officials, he was told part way through the year that he should wait until the following year to take the course and that he was going to be removed from the class in the meantime (in effect, extending his

schooling by another year). If my memory serves, it was only after his parents objected to the school principal, a school superintendent, and a school trustee, that he was allowed to continue in the class, and successfully complete the exam.

I am reminded of all this while reading Bill Reese's new volume, *Testing Wars in the Public Schools*. His detailed chronicling of the rise of the standardized testing movement in the United States begins in the mid-nineteenth century, with the now-classic struggles by Massachusetts' school promoters to "reform" what they saw as ineffective, and often brutal, schools run by the all-powerful Boston grammar school masters. One of the ways in which the latter were able to maintain their positions over the years was by holding annual student recitation events, which members of the governing school committee would attend. Subsequently these officials would submit laudatory anecdotal reports, on the strength of which the masters' contracts would be renewed for yet another year. In 1845, in order to break this cycle, a newly elected school committee devised a unique solution—standardized student exams, the predicted results of which would hold the masters in disrepute. Accordingly, that spring the school examiners showed up at the various schools, not to be submitted to another oral presentation by selected students, but rather to surprise everyone with written examination questions they had secretly prepared, and which all students were required to complete in writing. As predicted, the students did very poorly. Understandably, the grammar school masters soon retaliated, and the "testing wars" (40) began. These wars continued for some time, involving most of the political, economic, religious and schooling elite.

Within two decades this new examination mode of written tests had clearly taken hold, not only in Boston, but across virtually the entire United States. By 1866 for example, as Reese points out, a school superintendent in Cleveland was preparing "thirty-four different sets of printed questions" (174). In addition an entire new publishing industry was spawned—guides, "keys," and books filled with exam questions, advertised in teachers' magazines nationwide, which encouraged them (in the words of a San Francisco superintendent in 1883) to "spend nearly all their time in drilling and preparing the pupils for the annual examination" (205). One very popular book, *The Question Book: A General Review of Common School Studies, for the Use of Teachers, and Those Intending to Teach,* went through several editions. Its first issue in 1872 contained 1,047 questions and answers; its 1887 iteration, under new title, "bulked up to 3,700 questions, without counting the questions within the questions" (206).

By the 1870s strong opposition to these new testing regimes had set in, including mounting resistance from the same strata of schooling officials who had initially promoted them. Clearly, the escalating workload attached to preparing, distributing, and administering these tests, as well as assessing them and reporting on the results, was weighing heavily. In addition, officials soon tired of the increasing number of parents complaining that their children were better than indicated by test scores. Humanitarian concerns were also evident, however, and even a school superintendent in Omaha had to admit in 1873 that many children in his district would "manifest nervousness and fright" (175) during the testing ordeal. Not least, teachers weighed in heavily—both because of the increased workload involved and because of the

dramatic effects which the new regime imposed on the curriculum and their pedagogy. In addition, they were feeling the increased surveillance and control occasioned by these new "objective" measures of their "efficiency." The prestigious *Journal of Education* had to confess in 1884 that "written examinations were the 'greatest evil' in the schools and created perpetual 'warfare between the teacher and examiner'" (199). Even as early as 1866 another noted educator, Francis W. Parker, claimed that they "were the 'greatest obstacle' to 'real teaching,' destroying creativity and individual expression" (199). Perhaps concerned about what was seen as a massive shift back to rote teaching and learning which this testing regime had occasioned, one contributor to the *California Teacher* lamented in 1883 that "teaching can never rise higher than the examination" (204).

In spite of this opposition, little was actually accomplished, in relation to beating back the juggernaut. Ironically, the one major change which did occur — moderating to some extent the emotional one-time "high stakes" testing of students — in fact only served to further extend the overall testing regimen in the nation, as schooling officials "balanced" the results on the year-end exam with others administered during the term. For example, as Reese notes, as early as 1871, pupils across Little Rock, Arkansas "faced all-day tests once a month in every class above the fifth grade" (177). By the end of the century, Washington, DC superintendent William Powell, "an outspoken champion of child-centred education and vehement critic of competitive exams, was hauled before a Congressional committee, berated for allegedly lowering standards, and sacked" (223). The stage was certainly set for the continuation of these exams into the twentieth century, and beyond.

Reese offers a well-written book based on meticulous and detailed historical research into the formation of standardized exams in our schooling systems, and their subsequent effects. He cautions that "the nineteenth century . . . has to be understood on its own terms" but at the same time notes that it provides "more than a glimpse of the future" (226). Now, like then, international comparisons based on test results showing American schooling in a poor light are used to promote reform measures; now, like then, teachers are held out as the perpetrators of these purportedly low standards, and in need either of correction, or replacement. The testing industry flourishes and high stakes exams persist. Reese concludes that history "cannot offer prescriptions to cure current educational ills" (230). However, he adds that anyone "who imagines that recurrent attacks on high-stakes exams will lead to a diminution in the number and authority of tests is surely mistaken" (233).