

A student's perspective on the testing culture in America's schools

Movie Review: LISTEN — the Film, by Ankur Singh

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LISTEN — the Film is a documentary written, produced, filmed and narrated by 20-year-old filmmaker Ankur Singh from Normal, Illinois. It is an honest film, presented from the standpoint of students, about the terrible cost of the testing regimen in the public schools promoted under Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Obama's Race to the Top (RTTT) schemes.

Production started in December 2012, when Singh was a freshman in college. Singh produced the film using \$2,000 raised through a Kickstarter campaign and his own resources. The film has had fifteen viewings at campuses throughout the country since its release in September 2013. In March, he made the film available free online here to reach a wider audience.

The film opens with Bush and NCLB being signed into law in 2002. Singh was in second grade at the time. He took his first test in fourth grade, and in high school signed up for AP (Advanced Placement) courses, where, he said, he was "forced to memorize hundreds of pages of text, just to spit it back out."

Commenting on his attraction to filmmaking at a young age, Singh says, the art form requires genuine rigor, problem solving, creativity and patience. Seeking an answer as to why similar creativity and intellectual curiosity were being undermined in school in favor of a constant stream of tests, Singh says, "I decided to figure out what is going on with our education system."

His first stop was in Colorado Springs, Colorado, where he met with students Aubrey and Levi Bishop. Aubrey has sensory integration problems, which, she says, the high-pressure tests only exacerbated. Her family requested relief under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), but the school essentially told her parents, "She can walk, talk, read and write, so she can take the test."

Singh spoke with Aubrey's brother, Levi Bishop, who has Anxiety Disorder and Asperger symptoms and who was punished for not taking the CSAP (Colorado State

Assessment Program) for fourth graders.

Singh asked Aubrey and Levi's mother how this treatment made her feel. "How does it make me feel? Our kids get one chance at a high-quality, equitable education. That's it. It's been ruined."

Levi, now a teenager, gave his analysis: "What the schools don't understand is that they want to standardize everybody. Not everybody can be standardized."

Other interviewees include non-English speaker Salvador Bustamante, forced to take standardized tests in his non-native language, and 20-year teaching veteran Robin Kautz, who quit because of federal education policy.

Then there is Louise Schmitz, a college math major in Florida, who explained how testing led to her dropping out of high school. In this section of the film, Singh cites a 2011 National Research Council report, which found, "End-of-grade tests don't improve achievement, but they do increase dropout rates."

Her mother, Theresa, describes how Louise did exactly what she said she would do when she agreed to sign her out of high school. She took her General Educational Development (GED) exam and enrolled in college. She was enrolled in courses and had an apartment ready when her application for a student loan was refused, so she went to work instead.

Theresa, a kindergarten teacher, describes the painful process of forcing standardized testing onto five- and six-year-olds, whom she has to sit with "one-by-one" and teach how to "fill in the bubbles."

In the film, Singh engages Gage Park High School students, in a working class neighborhood of Chicago, who refused to take an optional standardized test. One student demands, "Why should we give them data? They don't care how teachers feel in the workplace or how students feel. And they don't let teachers decide their own curriculum."

The Chicago high school, Singh reports, had its funding cut by \$1 million four months after the interview. He

wrestles with the inequities: “Why is it that in the wealthiest country on earth,” the children of the poor get “torn-up textbooks, don’t get field trips...and are still expected to score as high as someone else?”

Funding for public education is in a “state of disaster,” Singh narrates, adding that “schools are being closed, teachers are losing their pensions and being fired and extracurricular programs are being cut—they don’t even have money for toilet paper,” he angrily declares, as his camera follows two female students showing how their Chicago school bathroom lacks the most basic necessities.

Singh, still looking for answers, asks rhetorically, “Where is all of the money for education going?” He points to private testing and publishing companies making handsome profits and expresses outrage that this money is not invested in students instead.

He points to a Brookings Institution report that \$1.7 billion is spent on tests alone and adds that the real figure is much larger if one takes into account the money paid to those who create, administer, market, and sell the tests.

Meanwhile, he points to the irrational use of resources: in Chicago, public schools are closed as the city spent \$33 million to build DePaul University a new basketball stadium; Philadelphia closed 23 schools and then opted to open a \$400 million prison instead; in St. Louis, Peabody, the world’s largest coal company received \$61 million in tax credits, yet \$2 million was taken from the St. Louis school district.

While corporate school “reformers” often point at how poorly US schools do on standardized tests, Singh says, they ignore that America is number two for child poverty in the developed world. The “number one indicator of student’s test score is their household income,” he says, adding, “So the problem clearly isn’t lazy teachers, unmotivated students, low standards, not enough math classes or too long a summer break, the problem is poverty. So it is not a surprise that the majority of schools targeted for closure are in impoverished neighborhoods.”

Singh’s documentary exposes how the educational policies of both big business parties are creating a class-based school system in America. Unlike other films that address the issue of testing, including *Standardized*, to his credit Singh is not held back by any allegiance to the teachers’ unions or the Democratic Party. This makes his film far more honest and allows the victims of this policy to voice their anger and opposition.

The film concludes with video clips of mass protests by students in Quebec and Chile and in US cities such as Portland, Oregon, and Chicago. Students hold banners declaring, “Education is not a Commodity” and denounce school officials for setting up their schools to fail and be

closed.

At this point, however, Singh cannot find a way forward. He suggests instead that student protests, including campaigns to “opt out” of testing, can somehow persuade the powers that be to change course.

He interviews a participant in the 2012 Quebec student strike, saying, “As students all over the world, we have to demand a seat at the table that is permanent.” Echoing this sentiment, Singh concludes the film with an angry appeal to students: “With education not a priority for both Democrats and Republicans; this is not a problem that can be fixed through a vote; this is a change that has to come from us—and who better to do it than a student.”

Students on their own cannot overcome the immense economic and political forces that are destroying public education around the world. Such a sentiment, however naïve, is nevertheless understandable given the fact that this generation has never seen mass struggles by the working class. But the right to education itself was bound up with such struggles, including the industrial and civil rights battles to end child labor and expand public education to every section of the population, regardless of class background.

Far from leading any struggles against school closings, budget cuts and teacher layoffs, the trade unions, including the American Federation of Teachers, have been active partners, in alliance with Obama and the Democratic Party, in the destruction of public education.

It is to the working class, however, that youth must turn to find the social force capable of breaking the grip of the corporate and financial elite and reorganizing society on the basis of human need, not profit. All of the determination of young people to fight for a future free of poverty, ignorance and war must be turned to building the leadership necessary to mobilize the working class against the two big business parties and the profit system they defend.

LISTEN is well researched and achieves the critical balance of being a documentary and also having a captivating story to tell about education and what it means today for young people. Singh raises all of the questions that this new generation is trying to grapple with. *LISTEN* is a reflection of the growing social opposition to the destruction of education and the determination of youth to fight for a future based on the principle of social equality.



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