

Appendix 11. The Education Writers Association: Then and now*

There exists an organization that claims to represent the interests of all US journalists who write on education issues, the Education Writers' Association (EWA).

EWA Coverage of Educational Testing, Summer 2000

Over twenty years ago, I examined EWA's website, in the same manner as any journalist might who was looking for background information on the topic of standardized testing, a major issue in the presidential campaign of that year.

A subsection on testing listed under "Hot Topics" contained 26 paragraphs. About half were factual or neutral to any testing debate, but the rest were not. Those paragraphs featured quotes from commentators and presentations of opinion. Ten paragraphs were devoted to an anti-testing point of view, while just two offered a contrary viewpoint. Representing the anti-testing point of view were the usual coterie of advocates and professors: the National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest), Alfie Kohn, Peter Sacks, Deborah Meier, the National Center for Restructuring Education, two Latino civil rights groups, and professors Robert Linn and Robert Hauser. Representing an opposing viewpoint were the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and me.

In the same subsection was a page devoted to an alleged anti-testing "backlash" organized by independent local groups of students and parents, which the EWA accepted as fact, rather than as a ruse mostly promoted by the same old anti-testing organizations ("grassroots organizations are rising up against tests"). One could find most of the "independent grassroots organizations" on the web site of the National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest), an organization that opposed all consequential testing. There, one would find that most of the leaders of the "independent grassroots organizations" worked for FairTest. One could also find some of the documents that FairTest and the "independent grassroots organizations" used to harass state and local testing directors and misinform the public. The documents looked a lot alike, like maybe they hadn't "risen up" so "independently" after all.

A rather revealing box aligned to the left of the main text section on testing bore a large, bold title "Web Sources" and links to five organizations. Any reporter only looking at this, by far the longest text section devoted to the testing issue, would have been presented only with these links as source references. Among the five were two organizations—the Education Commission of the States (ECS) and Catalyst for Chicago Education Reform—for whom testing is just one of many topics they consider. The remaining three links in the box were for websites of well-financed, high-profile organizations that concern themselves only with testing. They also happened to be the three most prominent anti-testing advocacy groups in the country (FairTest, CRESST (UCLA), and CSTEOP (Boston College)). Any reporter looking only at the main

* Appendix 11 of the book, *The Malfunction of US Education Policy: Elite Misinformation, Disinformation, and Selfishness*, by Richard P. Phelps

text section on testing at EWA's website would have these three sources recommended as contacts.

In the "New Research" section of the EWA's website were listed two sources, a Harvard Graduate School of Education conference transcript and a primer on testing written by Gerald Bracey for the American Youth Policy Forum. The transcript featured the comments of three staunch opponents of high-stakes testing (Angela Valenzuela, Ted Sizer, and Linda Nathan) and one journalist who could, arguably, be called neutral. For his part, no argument is possible that would have portrayed the late Gerald Bracey as neutral.

So, there you have it. In the heat of the presidential campaign, the EWA web site gave prime time to pretty much the whole range of anti-testing opponents. Between the "Hot Topics" and "New Research" sections, 13 anti-testing opponents, including the most extreme, were featured. How many commentators were represented who would argue that testing may not be so horrible and terrible and, by gosh, may have some benefits. Just two, the AFT and me.

As one final testimony to EWA's alleged slant on the testing issue, I note who supported it. FairTest, the most extreme anti-testing organization in the country, and the largest supplier of misinformation on testing, only listed or provided links to other anti-testing groups or individuals. There was no effort at "balance" in its literature or on its website; it gave its members a consistent diet of just one side of the story. Who was listed among those organizations that FairTest recommended for further information? A bunch of other well-known anti-testing organizations, and the Education Writers Association.

These findings were published in Fall 2000 at the website EducationNews.org. The following day, Lisa Walker, then Executive Director of EWA, took issue with my comments. According to Walker, "EWA's work always includes a full spectrum of viewpoints."

Her statement suggested a source of the problem. She did not know the full spectrum of viewpoints on testing. The EWA website concentrated on the views of advocates who were easy to find and those with the money and organization to promote their views, an advantage almost 100% on the side of the vested interests in the testing debate. Those sources it took some effort to find remained unknown and simply were not mentioned at the EWA website.

EWA Coverage of the Common Core Initiative (CCI), 2016

Around the same time EWA reported its aforementioned member survey declaring a "golden age" of education journalism (EWA 2016a, 2016b, Walsh 2016), the Boston-based Pioneer Institute released a report on EWA's forthcoming Boston annual meeting. Pioneer was one of few US think tanks to refuse money from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and its gaggle of rich allies to promote Common Core. Not surprisingly, Pioneer was also one of the few research centers willing to publish Common Core critiques.

One of their publications analyzed several years' worth of the Education Writers Association's sourcing for Common Core coverage. EWA's sourcing and coverage skewed overwhelmingly in

favor of Common Core, typically presenting advocates' favorable comments without mentioning that the advocates' were being paid to promote them (Phelps 2016b).

EWA's coverage was overwhelmingly elitist, too. The more prestigious the source, the more likely they were to be interviewed or invited to EWA conferences (Williams, J. C. 2017).

If dismissive reviewing is a feature and not a bug of scholarly celebrity, so too apparently is the money. Accepting money from the Gates and allied foundations has goosed the careers of many now-prominent scholars. Money buys staff. Money buys publicity. Money buys resources (Schwab 2020).

With their lopsided Common Core coverage two EWA tendencies—elitist and mercenary—merged (Brooks 2021).

The Pioneer report examined the EWA website during the Common Core push and found under EWA's "Common Core" heading "192 entries overall, including six EWA Radio broadcast transcripts, links to 19 research or policy reports, one 'Story Lab,' eight descriptions of and links to organizations useful for reporters to know, five seminar and three webinar agendas, 11 links to reporters' stories, and 42 links to relevant multimedia presentations."

So, whom did the EWA rely on for education policy expertise "to help journalists get the story right?" Which experts did they invite to their seminars and webinars? Whose reports and essays did they link to? Whose interviews did they link to or post? EWA claimed at the time to represent "all the research."

Over the previous several years, EWA had provided speaking and writing platforms for 102 avowed Common Core advocates, seven avowed Common Core opponents, 12 who were mostly in favor, and one who was mostly opposed. Not counting the few sources delivering neutral information, nor the "reports from the front lines" panels of teachers and school administrators (most of whom, at EWA meetings, appeared to support the CCI).

Randomly select an EWA Common Core "expert" from the EWA website or their conferences of that period, and the odds exceeded ten to one the person would be an advocate and, more than likely, a paid promoter.

Included among the 102 Common Core advocates for whom the EWA provided a platform to speak or write, were officials from the "core" Common Core organizations, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the National Governors Association (NGA), the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), and the Smarter-Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). Also included were representatives from research and advocacy organizations paid handsomely by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and other funding sources to promote the Common Core Standards and tests: the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the New America Foundation, the Center for American Progress, the Center on Education Policy, and the Business Roundtable. Moreover, one found ample representation in

EWA venues for organizations directly profiting from PARCC and SBAC test development activity, such as the Center for Assessment, WestEd, the Rand Corporation, and professors from the Universities of North Carolina and Illinois, Harvard and Stanford Universities, UCLA, Michigan State, and Southern Cal (USC).

Most of the small contingent of CCI opponents that EWA recognized did not oppose Common Core standards or tests *per se* but rather standardized tests in general, or the then-current quantity of tests. Among the seven attributions to avowed opponents, three went to journalist favorite, the National Center for Fair and Open Testing (a.k.a., FairTest), an organization that opposes all consequential standards and assessments, not just Common Core's.

The seven opponents comprised one extreme advocacy group, a lieutenant governor, one local education administrator, an education graduate student, and another advocacy group called Defending the Early years, which argued (validly) that the grades K–2 Common Core Standards were age-inappropriate. No think tank analysts. No professors. No celebrities.

102 in favor and seven opposed; several dozen PhDs from the nation's most prestigious universities and think tanks in favor and seven fringe elements opposed.

Accept this as reality and pro-CCI propaganda characterizations of their opponents might have seemed reasonable. Those in favor of CCI were prestigious, knowledgeable, trustworthy authorities. Those opposed were narrow minded, self-interested, uninformed, inexperienced, or afraid of "higher, deeper, tougher, more rigorous" standards and tests. Those in favor of CCI wanted progress; those opposed did not.

In a dedicated website section, EWA described and linked to eight organizations purported to be good sources for CCI stories. Among them were the core CCI organizations Achieve, CCSSO, NGA, PARCC, and SBAC, and the well-paid CC promoters, the Fordham Institute. The only opposing organization suggested? FairTest.

So, what of the great multitude who desired genuinely higher standards and consequential tests and recognized that CCI delivered neither? ...who believed Common Core was never a good idea, never made any sense, and should be completely dismantled? Across several years, categories and types of EWA coverage, one finds barely a trace.

The representation of research and policy expertise at EWA national seminars mirrored that at its website. Keynote speakers included major CCI advocates College Board President David Coleman (twice), US Education Secretary Arne Duncan (twice), Secretary John King, Governor Bill Haslam, and "mostly pro" (at that time) AFT President Randi Weingarten, along with the unsure Governor Charlie Baker. No CCI opponents.

Among other speakers presented as experts in CCI related sessions at the Nashville annual seminar two years earlier were 14 avowed CCI advocates—Michael Cohen (Achieve), Terry Holiday (Commonwealth of Kentucky), Jamie Woodson (TN SCORE), Dennis Van Roekel (NEA),

Amber Northern (Fordham Institute), William Schmidt (Michigan State U), Sandra Alberti (Student Achievement Partners), Jacqueline King (SBAC), Laura Slover (PARCC), Tommy Bice (State of Alabama), Kristen DiCerbo (Pearson Inc.), Kevin Huffman (TN DOE), Lisa Guernsey (New America Foundation), and Robert Pondiscio (*Education Next*, Fordham Institute)—one of the “mostly pro” variety, and one critic, local education administrator Carol Burris. At least ten of the 14 pro-CCI experts had worked directly in CCI-funded endeavors.

The previous year’s Chicago Seminar featured nine CCI advocates—Morgan Polikoff (USC, Fordham Institute), Andy Isaacs (Everyday Math, U. Chicago), Dana Cartier (IL Center for School Improvement), Diane Briars (NCTM), Matt Chingos (Brookings), Scott Marion (Center for Assessment), Chris Minnich (CCSSO), James Pellegrino (U. Illinois-Chicago), and Andrew Latham (WestEd)—and one opponent, Robert Schaeffer of FairTest. Five of the nine advocates had worked directly in CCI-funded endeavors.

In addition to Secretary John King’s keynote, the 2016 Boston Seminar featured a whopping 16 avowed CCI proponents, two of the “mostly pro” persuasion, and one opponent, Linda Hanson, a local area educator and union rep. At least ten of the 16 proponents had worked in CCI-funded activities.

One session entitled “The Massachusetts Story” might have invited some of those responsible for the rise of the Commonwealth from a middling performer thirty years ago to the nation’s academic leader ten years later. Sandra Stotsky, for example, wrote many of the English Language Standards in the 1990s, was centrally involved in managing the Massachusetts “education miracle,” might be the country’s most prolific writer on CCI issues, and lived in the Boston area. Instead, EWA invited three after-the-fact regional leaders who had abandoned the miracle in favor of Common Core. (Incidentally, Stotsky had been outspoken in her criticism of Common Core media coverage.)

In general, some of EWA’s most frequent expert sources worked in think tanks. The EWA loves think tanks, but not just any. While in Chicago, they could have invited scholars affiliated with the Heartland Institute, a staunch opponent of the CCI. But they didn’t. For the Boston meeting, they could have invited scholars affiliated with the Pioneer Institute (e.g., Sandra Stotsky and R. James Milgram, both of whom served on the CCI’s evaluation committee); Pioneer was arguably the country’s leading source of scholarly opposition to the CCI at the time. But they didn’t.

Turns out, the only think tanks that mattered in EWA’s judgment were national think tanks. Heartland and Pioneer might have been considered “regional” think tanks, despite all the effort they put into national issues. Instead of inviting locally based think tankers opposed to the CCI in Chicago and Boston, EWA preferred to fly CCI think tank advocates out from DC.

For the “reform” side of education issues, in general, EWA invitations appeared stuck inside a tight little circle. EWA frequently called upon Harvard-affiliated folk (e.g., Chingos, Ferguson, Fryer, Hess, Ho, Kane, Long, Loveless, Mehta, Putnam, Reville, Rhee, Sahlberg, Schwartz, West).

EWA also betrayed a fondness for anyone who had worked for Chester “Checker” Finn (e.g., Petrilli, Pondiscio, Northern, Smarick, Brickman, and Polikoff).

There exist many thousands of education researchers in the world, thousands of higher education institutions, and hundreds of relevant research journals. But the EWA chose to rely almost exclusively on an infinitesimal proportion for expertise. Ironically, the tiny group on which they depend, while prestigious, includes some of the world’s most poorly read and censorious researchers (Chapman 2019, Phelps 2016a).

EWA loves the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in particular. Within the previous few years, EWA had conferred upon Fordham an EWA best web site award and, to Fordham’s Robert Pondiscio, a National Award for Education Reporting in the “Education Organizations and Experts” category. Fordham and Pondiscio accepted their awards in Nashville.

Several possible explanations for the Education Writers Association expertise sourcing myopia come to mind, such as habit, convenience, naïveté, passivity (e.g., expecting experts to contact them rather than looking for them), and an insatiable attraction to money and power (e.g., EWA sponsors seem very well represented at EWA venues). But chief among them are elitism and a wholesale conflation of celebrity for expertise. Far too often, the EWA features “expert” opinion from someone who is well known as a commentator on education policy generally (or, at least, well known generally) but who genuinely knows little about the topic at hand.

At EWA seminars, whether national, regional, or topical, one observes some effort to make good use of local education researchers and university professors, but not just any. Tennessee hosts many higher education institutions, but Vanderbilt professors overwhelmed the agenda at EWA’s Nashville meeting. Likewise, there exist many universities in the Chicago area, but EWA preferred to invite those from the University of Chicago and Northwestern, the two most elite, to its Chicago conference. Boston University invested substantial resources in hosting the 2016 EWA Boston meeting, and several of its academics were involved in session panels. But, twice as many came from Harvard.

The EWA Today (<https://ewa.org>): The High Price of EWA’s News

The registration fee for the Education Writers Association 2023 National Seminar in Atlanta: \$650/person (late fee \$800)

Current Sustaining Funders:

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Foundation for Child Development, Funders for Adolescent Science Translation, The Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, Lumina Foundation, The Spencer Foundation, The Wallace Foundation, The Walton Family Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

National Seminar Sponsors (2022):

ECMC Foundation, Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, SXSW EDU, EGF Accelerator, Arnold Ventures, IBM, American Institutes for Research, GreatMinds, Lumina Foundation, National Alliance for

Public Charter Schools, Collaborative for Student Success, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship, Flyover Zone, SAGA Education, American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association, University of California Riverside School of Education

Sponsorship Opportunities:

Website Messaging

Purchase announcement space on EWA's website for four weeks.

- Run of site – \$ 5,000
- Blogs – \$ 2,000
- Jobs – \$ 2,000
- Events – \$ 1,200

Podcast Sponsorship

"EWA Radio produces a weekly podcast focused on journalism and the education beat. The EWA public editor hosts engaging interviews with journalists about education and its coverage in the media."

- \$ 3,000

Sponsorship Details

- Sponsorship of four EWA Radio podcast episodes
- Acknowledgment of sponsorship on promotional emails and materials
- Verbal acknowledgement of sponsorship by EWA representative during the podcast episode
- Acknowledgement of sponsorship on EWA website

Exclusive Newsletter Messaging

- \$ 2,500

Details

- Four-week purchase
- Exclusive sponsorship of EWA e-newsletter sent on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday

Newsletter Messaging

- \$1,000

Details

- Four-week purchase
- Space in EWA e-newsletter sent on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday

Print Messaging

- \$1,000

Details

- Full-page, color announcement in printed program at topical/regional journalist-only seminar
- Available for any topic-based seminar. Previous topics include: higher education, Latino education, student safety and well-being, teacher training and

evaluations, adolescent learning, student-centered learning, charters and school choice, assessments and testing, early education, and STEM education.

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