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## Teaching Is *Not* Testing

Winter 2006

## *A community organizes to find an alternative to California's graduation exam*

**By Tiny aka Lisa Gray-Garcia**

The stores were small, low roofed, and peeling paint. The storefront signs were oddly sized, lettered in handmade cursive font, and prone to losing their neon. Through the steam rising from the sun-baked asphalt in front of my car, I spotted a large block of faded red brick fronted by an aging marquis: Richmond High School.

"We are hard-working students. We are simply asking that this test be more fair, that there be alternatives to the exit exam, or that it be given in the students' first language — because one size doesn't fit all," said Maria.

Maria spoke at a press conference in front of Richmond High, where she is a student. She is also a member of Youth Together, a youth justice organization working to eliminate California's mandatory exit exam.

As I watched Maria speak in September 2005, I wondered about the possibility of collaboration between Youth Together and Justice Matters, a research and policy institute that works for racial justice in education, where I am communications director. I thought our combined forces might affect policy on the exit exam.

Youth Together was founded in 1996 by five nonprofit organizations to address racially based violence on school campuses and to foster campus-based leadership for high school youth on issues of social justice. In 2003 it began working to raise awareness on the impact of the California High School Exit Exam on low-income students of color in the San Francisco Bay Area. These same students, many of whom do not speak English as their first language, were failing the exit exam in large numbers.

California is one of 25 states requiring an exit test for a high school diploma. But the state has not addressed the lack of resources and other educational inequities that exist for low-income students of color.

The number of California students affected by the exit exam is staggering: As of March 2006, 46,700 seniors had not passed the test. Of these, 20,600 are designated as English language learners and 28,300 were low-income. In addition to an outcry from educators, advocates, and thousands of youth across California, a report from the state's own sanctioned research team, Human Resources Research Organization

(HUMRRO), acknowledged the impact of the exit exam on the students who would be denied diplomas in 2006. HUMRRO recommended implementing multiple methods of assessing English and math skills to gauge students' achievements more accurately.

The 2005-06 school year was an urgent time for groups concerned about the exit exam because it was the first year that high school seniors who did not pass the test would be denied a diploma.

A month after Youth Together's press conference, Justice Matters formalized a collaborative campaign with Youth Together in Richmond, one of the cities in the West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD).

After the press conference on the streets of Richmond, our staff of researchers, advocates, and educators began a series of brainstorming sessions that included student leaders from Youth Together and a



From left, Casey Saeliew, a Richmond High student and youth organizer from Youth Together, Avillene Covarrubias, a Richmond High student and youth organizer from Youth Together, and Trina Montgomery, a Richmond High student.

Photo: Poor News Network Photo by William Romero

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sympathetic school board member, Dave Brown. Our driving question was this: How could we respond to the crisis of unresponsive, narrow student learning in this district in a way that would also get at the testing issues that immediately faced these youth?

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The exit exam's constitutionality was already being challenged in the courts in two separate class action suits brought by Public Advocates and the firm Morrison and Foerster. Although these were cases with statewide implications, the majority of plaintiffs in both actions were students in West Contra Costa and Oakland.

There are a total of 35,000 students in the West Contra Costa Unified School District. Of those, 14,000 attend schools that receive federal Title I money (which goes to schools with a high number of low-income students). Because these schools receive federal funds, they are the most severely affected by No Child Left Behind-mandated testing requirements. Of the 14,000 students in these schools, 12,600 are children of color.

Seeking the voices of parents, students, educators, and community members in the district, Justice Matters and Youth Together began organizing a series of community events and actions aimed at identifying the problems faced in that district.

### **Proposing Alternatives**

Next, Justice Matters staff began to ask ourselves how we could address students' frustrating learning experiences and the looming threat of denied diplomas for seniors.

It was almost 6:00 pm on another wet Friday night. As the rains pounded down on our windows and our spirits, the phone began ringing. It was school trustee Dave Brown.

After what seemed like hours, Program Director Olivia Araiza concluded the phone conversation with Brown. Smiling broadly, she told us about Dave's decision to put forward a resolution to offer a diploma to seniors who met all of their other graduation requirements and completed an alternative to the exit exam. "And," she explained, "he wants the alternative to focus on success in life after high school."

Before she could finish her words, everyone in the office was smiling with her. A small door of access into the often-static world of education policy was opened.

Another series of meetings ensued between Dave Brown, Justice Matters staff, and youth leaders from Youth Together to craft a school board resolution. We hoped that our proposal would create a template for change that could ripple across the state.

In less than two weeks, our collaborative proposal was done. We called it the "Senior Year Demonstration." (See sidebar.)

The Senior Year Demonstration proposed a structured process for students to demonstrate knowledge and skills through portfolios, action research, and exhibitions. As we developed this alternative, we grappled with fundamental questions. We first had to figure out what values this alternative should reflect. We knew we stood in opposition to those who seemed only to want to create assessments that measured a narrow set of academic skills. The alternative needed to be connected to the idea of success after high school.

We decided not to confine the idea of success after high school to a student's ability to obtain lucrative employment. While economic self-sufficiency is one important purpose of education, we disagreed with the prevailing thinking that individual earnings and national economic growth are the only valid goals for our school system.

We wanted the alternative to be a force for broadening the discussion about the purpose of education. It could remind people that education can help build a more just society and foster the growth and health of our communities and

families. We decided that the Senior Year Demonstration should allow students to demonstrate their readiness to build a stronger democracy, contribute to their family and community, and pursue a career. Students would be asked to use the state academic standards to demonstrate their knowledge, but only insofar as they were demonstrating their readiness in the core areas we had selected.

Our next question: How should students show their knowledge? We believed that assessments should enhance students' ability to show what they know. We gathered ideas for accomplishing this from the practices of innovative high schools such as Anzar High School in California and Central Park East Secondary School in New York. We designed the Senior Year Demonstration to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge through portfolios, and also through presenting exhibitions to the school and local community where they could incorporate theater, art, science experiments, and more.

We also saw learning as a community venture. Students would be asked to help each other prepare their demonstrations. Community members would be recruited as additional resources and would be invited to witness students' final exhibitions.



From left, Justice Matters staff and Youth Together youth leaders protesting in solidarity when the vote was taken.

Photo: Poor News Network Photo by William Romero

Something interesting started to happen in discussions of the Senior Year Demonstration. The conversations turned to how the demonstration reflected values and aspirations for what all of high school should look like. Ultimately, the board resolution itself included the idea that the demonstration not only serve as an alternative to the exit exam, but that it be used to change what high school is about.

## Teaching Is Not Testing

Justice Matters communications staff began creating a media campaign to support the exit exam alternative. We wanted to be sure that low-income students and families of color in the district, the ones directly affected by the exit exam, were heard.

Justice Matters staff met with students and families to craft our media message. All members of the press and school board members received *Multiple Measures Approaches to High School Graduation*, published by the School Redesign Network at Stanford University. This report summarizes the research about the negative consequences of exit exams and explains how, unlike California, most states that have exit exams also include alternative measures of student performance, using the examination as only one indicator of graduation readiness.

The proposal went before the WCCUSD school board for a vote on April 10. Before the meeting, we held a pre-vote press conference on the lawn outside the hearing room. The media turnout was huge.

"I have completed all my classes, I got good grades, and yet I still can't get a

diploma," said Trina, 17, a high school student in the district. Young African-American women like Trina captured the camera's gaze. She was quoted on ABC, NBC, and CBS television local affiliates.

The voices at the press conference were enhanced by visual aids announcing the same clear message: *Teaching is NOT testing!* This shout for justice was plastered on buttons, banners, and signs held and worn by youth, families, educators, and advocates who stood together in front of the cameras.

### ¡Sí Se Puede!

As the press conference ended, more than 400 students from the district marched up the street to the school board meeting. "¡Sí Se Puede!" (Yes we CAN!) they shouted.

As the two-hour meeting progressed, hundreds of students, parents, teachers, and advocates spoke in favor of the proposal. Only a handful of mostly white administrators, businesspeople, and residents of other parts of the county spoke in opposition.

School board members, one by one, responded to a warning from State Superintendent Jack O'Connell that passing the resolution would break the law and put district money at risk. "We are not a diploma mill. We don't just give them away," lectured one board member. "You need to earn them."

And then it was time. The final vote was counted. The school board defeated the resolution 4-1. In the moment following the vote, Justice Matters staff, Youth Together leaders, parents, educators, and community members stood up simultaneously and walked out.

Through teary eyes I asked one of the youth leaders from Youth Together, Wendy, 16, who had spoken so eloquently in favor of the proposal, if she felt discouraged. "Oh no," she said, her brown eyes sparking fire into mine. "This is just the beginning."

That meeting was the beginning of a similar landmark fight that Youth Together launched in two more districts in the Bay Area, Berkeley and Oakland, in the ongoing struggle to defeat the unjust exit exam. The Oakland effort resulted in a unanimous school board vote in favor of dropping the exit exam. Unfortunately, the vote lacked the power to actually kill the exit exam because Oakland schools have been taken over by the state. But it remains a powerful symbolic gesture.

For Justice Matters staff it was also the beginning of a long-term fight to make learning accessible and meaningful in West Contra Costa County through the ongoing effort of parents, students, and legislators.

*Tiny aka Lisa Gray-Garcia ([tiny@justicematters.org](mailto:tiny@justicematters.org)) is the mixed-race, previously homeless daughter of Dee and mama to Tiburcio. She is also the communications director at Justice Matters, a revolutionary poet, and a radio, online, and print media producer. Her memoir, *Criminal of Poverty: Growing up Homeless in America*, will be released by City Lights Press in December 2006. The complete text of the senior year demonstration proposal is online at [www.justicematters.org](http://www.justicematters.org).*

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