

On the Scarcity of School Resources
By Alison McDowell

The parable of the Sheep and Goats, Matthew 25:31-46: When the time comes, the King will gather all nations together and divide them into the righteous sheep and the cursed goats.

41 “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

44 “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

45 “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

Philadelphia’s children ARE the least of these. They longer have the right to textbooks, transportation, desks, or clean classrooms. They can’t count on tutoring, a librarian help them pick a “just right” book, a nurse to take care of their medical needs, or a counselor to talk to when they are troubled.

While we are busy depriving our children of their basic human rights, the PA Department of Education is awarding a contract valued at tens of millions of dollars to create PA Core aligned tests, tests that will support the carefully constructed narrative that our children, their teachers, and their schools are “failing.” John Weiss, head of Assessment and Accountability for the state, told me he anticipated significantly fewer students would be deemed proficient next year due to more “rigorous” standards. No surprise there, since they get to set the cut scores.

Austerity, assessment, and accountability are inflicting mortal wounds on public education. Those who do not speak out against the toxic combination of starvation and rigged tests are accessories to a crime being perpetrated on our most vulnerable citizens. Participate in the charade that only outputs matter, not inputs and you’ve chosen the path of the cursed goats. There are no innocent adult bystanders. The price of complicity on your conscience is one that only you can calculate.

It is immoral to standardize children. It is immoral to test students on the content of books their schools cannot afford. It is immoral to test children not yet fluent in English and rank them against native speakers. It is immoral to spend millions of dollars on tests while asthmatic students spend their days gasping in classrooms where damp plaster flakes off the walls.

We have seen far too much injustice this summer. The fate of Ferguson, Missouri is inextricably linked to the fate Philadelphia’s students. We cannot wait to act. Parents and teachers must be moved to exercise the power they have. As they starve our schools, we can starve them of the data they are using against our children, teachers, and schools. To find out more about standardized test refusal come to a potluck this coming Monday. For details see me after the meeting.