AFTER TAKING BOLD STAND AGAINST TESTING KINDERGARTNERS, SUSAN BOWLES IS TEACHER OF YEAR

In the political landscape that is Florida, Gainesville is a lonely, tiny blue dot in a vast sea of red. Last night, that blue dot celebrated a symbolic act that could have major repercussions in the national elections coming up next year. Kindergarten teacher Susan Bowles was named Teacher of the Year in Alachua County, adding further validation to the bold stand she took last September in refusing to administer a test she found to be flawed and an egregious waste of classroom time. In her bold act of refusing to administer the test, Bowles fully expected to lose the job she loves so much. Instead, her action prompted the state to drop the test and she has been given a high honor for her work.

Naming Bowles as Teacher of the Year takes on a special symbolism to me because it comes precisely when JEB! Bush is making his push to enter the 2016 presidential election. To JEB! fans, his educational “reforms” in Florida are one of his chief accomplishments. To those of us in the blue dot, we know that JEB!’s “reforms” had nothing to do with school performance and had everything to do with enriching the private firms run by his cronies to administer the tests. That enrichment of his cronies resulted in trickle down, but only to JEB! [And Rick Scott’s “reforms” of JEB!’s testing program were merely a function of switching out JEB!’s cronies for Scott’s, but I digress.] Adding even more to the symbolism here, Bowles teaches at Lawton Chiles Elementary.

The test to which Bowles objected was only one in a wide array of tests mandated by the test-crazed Florida Legislature. This test, the Florida Assessments for Instruction in Reading (inappropriately marketed by Scott's cronies as FAIR), was legislated to be administered three times a year. But as the Gainesville Sun reported in September, Bowles found that changes made for this year made the test meaningless and a huge waste of time:

> In past years, both tests existed in paper format for kindergartners, but this year the FAIR became a computer-based test for the state's youngest students, which has made it necessary for teachers to administer the test one-on-one.
>
> /snip/
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> Some kindergartners are coming to the test without ever having touched a computer mouse before, which Bowles said causes the testing time to stretch from the prescribed 35 minutes to 50 minutes or an hour.
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> There is also no way to go back and correct answers on the test, she said, so a student who accidentally double-clicks to enter an answer could end up skipping multiple screens on the test, rendering their results inaccurate.
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> But the main issue for Bowles, and others, is the loss of instructional time after administering these tests – a total of six weeks, in fact.

Bowles initially took to Facebook to announce her decision not to administer the test. Again, from the Sun:

> Bowles said she was so frustrated after trying to test two students last week that on Sunday she took to Facebook to publicly air her act of civil

> disobedience, in a post titled, “Why I am refusing to give the FAIR test to my kindergarteners.”
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> “I know I may be in breach of my contract by not administering this test,” she wrote in the post. “I cannot in good conscience submit to administering this test three times a year, losing six weeks of instruction. There is a good possibility I will be fired.”

Attention to Bowles’ move snowballed, and her actions garnered huge amounts of support from parents. A blog at the Washington Post noted the attention. The blog post reproduced what Bowles posted on Facebook about the test. Bowle’s preface to her letter to parents is especially courageous:

> To the parents of the boys and girls in my class,
>
> I wrote you a letter over the weekend to let you know that I am refusing to administer the FAIR test [Florida Assessments for Instruction in Reading] to your precious little ones. I had hoped to send you an email or letter, but it would not be professional of me or allowed by the district for a letter to go out letting you know that I am doing something that is a breach of contract and therefore against the law. I want you to know that for the 26 years I have been a classroom teacher, I have been a good employee, and have always complied with my superiors. I also want you to know that this is not in any way being done because our principal or superintendent are mandating these tests. This is a government issue. So this decision does not involve anyone I work for. It is an act of civil disobedience.

> I am hoping for government change in policy regarding testing.

That last bit turned out to be prescient, as well. Bowle's letter to parents was dated September 7, 2014. The Gainesville Sun article came out on September 9 and the blog post at the Washington Post was September 11. On September 15, Florida's Commissioner of Education caved in to public pressure about the test and cancelled it. As the Post stated in a blog post that day:

> It turns out she wasn't fired. On Monday, Owen Roberts, the superintendent of schools in Alachua County where Bowles teaches, sent a letter to parents saying that Florida Commissioner of Education Pam Stewart has decided not to require FAIR testing for any students in grades K-2. The e-mail doesn't directly name Bowles but does refer to "all the attention focused on this issue over the past few days."

Congratulations to Susan Bowles for her brave act of civil disobedience and the benefit to the youngest Florida students that it produced. Congratulations also to Alachua County Public Schools for rewarding Bowles' principled stand.