

STUDY
GUIDE
for



**TESTED:
One American
School Struggles
to Make
the Grade**

for

Congregational
Adult Education,
Justice Committees, and
Reading Groups



An Exploration of Injustice
in the Federal Public Education
Law, the No Child Left Behind Act





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... the [principal] said. “Bombard, bombard, bombard those children with the kinds of questions they’ll have on the test. You want the students at a level of automaticity with reading those test-like questions.” (*TESTED*, p. 181)

They learned to adhere to the ... formula, in BCRs [Brief Constructed Responses] like the one Miss Johnson led her students through one day:

Damon and Pythias is a play because it has the elements of a play. Some elements of a play are that plays have stage directions. Also, there is a narrator. This play also has a lot of characters. So I know this play has all the features it needs.

... The third graders answered again and again what traits described the main character of a story. They wrote the “*I know this is a play because*” BCR about ten times but never got to take the parts of characters and act a play out loud. They wrote “*I know this is a fairy tale because*” and “*I know this is a fable because*” but never tried their hand at creating either. About a fake brochure they wrote, “*The text features that make this easy for a third grader to understand are italics, numbering and underline.*” But they never made their own brochures with their own text features; the only thing they underlined were hundred-dollar words. They wrote about fifty times, “*I know this is a poem because it has rhyme, rhythm, and stanzas,*” ... but they only wrote three poems: (*TESTED*, pp. 127–128)



Introduction

Linda Perlstein's 2007 book, *TESTED: One American School Struggles to Make the Grade* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), explores the effects of the standards-based accountability philosophy that is embedded in the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). A riveting narrative about public education under NCLB, *TESTED* recounts the choices that the principal and teachers in one Maryland elementary school believe NCLB forces upon them. Readers spend the entire 2005–2006 school year with Perlstein at Tyler Heights Elementary, a school that serves very poor children and teeters on the brink between making or losing the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) rating NCLB awards to “successful” schools. Readers experience the pressure—on the curriculum, on the principal, on the teachers, on the children—of the annual standardized tests that will determine whether the school makes AYP or will be judged a failure. Readers join the third-grade teaching team as they collaboratively plan each day to the minute. With days stretching into months, readers hear these teachers weigh the consequences of the choices they feel forced to make and listen in as the children yearn to do more at school—to do some science, read for fun, or perform a play.

Why study *TESTED* at church? Why think about justice in public education at church?

Members of the National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy believe that Christian faith speaks to public morality and to the ways our nation should bring justice and compassion into its civic life. This call to justice is central reform needed in public education, which represents America's largest civic institution and where enormous achievement gaps alert us that, while some children have access to excellent education, other children are left behind.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is the most recent (2002) version of the federal education law. NCLB radically shifted the philosophy of federal education law to incorporate standards-based accountability and it purports to address educational inequity. Now, however, after six years of seeing the impact of NCLB's hundreds of cascading regulations (and as the law faces reauthorization), it has become clear that the law is leaving behind more children than it is saving, especially children of color and poor children in America's big cities and remote rural areas—the very children the law purports to rescue.

Congress has been working on the five-year 2007 reauthorization for many months now, but due to considerable philosophical disagreement about the role of the federal government in education, Congress has not been able to pass the reauthorization. While the law will be continued until Congress acts, Congress must eventually reauthorize the federal education law.

It now appears, however, that the reauthorization will be delayed until 2009 when there is a new President, a new Secretary of Education, and a new Congress. This, therefore, is an opportune time to reflect on questions our faith calls us to ask about teachers, children, the purposes of education, and the federal role in education.



Using this Study Guide

This study guide poses questions about how our society embeds our views of children into its very structures, for public schools are one of the core institutions to which our society has assigned the work of forming our children. What must change if these institutions are to bring us closer to what we would expect in God's realm? Every Sunday, as we pray the Lord's Prayer, we say the words, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10). Surely as we reflect on how we can help prepare for God's reign on earth, we should keep our children at the center of our discernment. As Jesus attests, children are at the very center of our lives in community: "Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.' And he laid his hands on them and went on his way." (Matthew 19:14-15)



This guide presents a series of study questions for which there are no right or wrong answers. It is designed for use by a variety of groups and we present this guide to help your justice committee, reading group, or traditionally structured educational group (e.g. adult Sunday school) engage in this exploration together. The discussion guide is divided into five sections and includes some suggestions for leading sessions. If you are using the guide in a traditional educational group, the outline that appears in the appendix may be helpful. However, we encourage you to reword, reorder, or rearrange the sections and questions to suit your needs. You can organize the content of this guide and arrange your conversation for one, two, three, or even more sessions. Do modify the content and use it in ways that are most appropriate to your setting.

It is assumed that group participants will have read *TESTED*. You will see that this guide invites participants to reflect on Scripture and on provocative statements from other sources, including from the book *TESTED*, itself. It will be helpful if you have on hand newsprint and markers or some other way of recording your group's responses.

We strongly urge you to invite the public school teachers and school administrators from your pews to read *TESTED* and be a part of your conversation. One section of the guide is designed specifically for you to engage public school personnel around their responses to *TESTED* and NCLB; however we encourage you to listen to these professionals throughout your study. Listen as they describe their experiences in public schools. Listen to their joys. Listen to the pressures they face. Make this an opportunity to listen to public school educators, whose voices are too seldom consulted on the subject of public school reform.

Finally, we urge you to be prayerful as you discuss *TESTED*, as you listen to your congregation's teachers, and as you reflect on God's intentions for children as they grow and learn.



Discussion Guide

I. General Discussion about *TESTED*

In *TESTED* the reader is left to weigh the benefits and the costs of the choices the teachers and principal feel pressured to make in response to NCLB.

- Begin by listing any benefits of NCLB identified by the group.
- List the serious costs of NCLB: for the students; for the teachers for the school.
- Invite discussion of the following questions:

Are there ways in which this book surprised you? challenged your assumptions? troubled you?

What feelings did the story engender in you about: the teachers; the principal; the children; our nation's educational priorities?

Read the four passages below then consider the questions that follow. The first is from the psalmist, who praises God that each person is created in God's image. The second is from Dr. James Comer, a child psychiatrist and founder of the Yale Child Study Center and the School Development Program. The third and fourth are from Deborah Meier, a professor at New York University, a former school principal in New York and Boston and a well-respected educational thinker.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
—Psalm 139: 13-17 (NRSV)



In our School Development Program we consider six pathways critical: physical, social-interactive, psychological-emotional, ethical, linguistic, and cognitive-intellectual. Contemporary education addresses primarily the linguistic and cognitive pathways. But it is growth along all these pathways that prepares children for school and for life. They must gradually take primary responsibility for their own growth, development, and performance.

—James P. Comer, M.D, *Leave No Child Behind: Preparing Today's Youth for Tomorrow's World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 74.



Standards-based reform systems vary enormously in their details. But they are generally organized around a set of four interconnected mechanisms: first, an official document . . . designed by experts in various fields that describes what kids should know and be able to do at given grade levels in different subjects; second classroom curricula—commercial textbooks and scripted programs—that are expected to convey that agreed-upon knowledge; third, a set of assessment tools (tests) to measure whether children have achieved the goals specified in the framework; and fourth, a scheme of rewards and penalties directed at schools and school systems, but ultimately at individual kids, who fail to meet the standards as measured by the tests.



—Deborah Meier, *Will Standards Save Public Education?*
(Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), pp. 5-6.

Even in the hands of sincere allies of children, equity and public education, the current push for far greater standardization than we've ever previously attempted is fundamentally misguided . . . By shifting the locus of authority to outside bodies, it undermines the capacity of schools to instruct by example in the qualities of mind that schools in a democracy should be fostering in kids—responsibility for one's own ideas, tolerance for the ideas of others, and a capacity to negotiate differences. Standardization instead turns teachers and parents into the local instruments of externally imposed expert judgment. It thus decreases the chances that young people will grow up in the midst of adults who are making hard decisions and exercising mature judgment . . .

—Deborah Meier, *Will Standards Save Public Education?*
(Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), pp. 4-5.

- Think about the educational assumptions implied by the three different writers. What operative definitions and understandings of educational goals appear to undergird each of the quotes?
- Deborah Meier defines standards-based reform; then the second passage explains why she does not share this view. How does Meier's definition of standards-based reform fit with the values that are operating at Tyler Heights Elementary School? Do you share Meier's views about the dangers of this kind of reform? If so, discuss how those dangers are operating at Tyler Heights.

II. Engage Public School Educators in Conversation about *TESTED*

Discuss the following together:

- Ask the public school educators to share the feelings they experienced while reading this book.
- Compare the responses of professional educators with responses of those who do not work in schools.
- Ask the public school educators if they find any strengths in what is happening at Tyler Heights Elementary School.
- Ask what they find most troubling in the story of Tyler Heights Elementary School.
- Many teachers choose their profession as a vocation—a response to what they perceive as a call. Invite any teachers in your group who feel comfortable to share how their sense of call has been affected over the years and by the waves of education reform that have swept the United States. Ask, in particular, for them to discuss the impact of standards-based reform as it is implemented in NCLB.



Read the following quote and then invite the educators to respond to the questions that follow.

Nearly every teacher I know rejects the assertion—delivered implicitly or at times explicitly—that before No Child Left Behind, they didn’t know where each of their students stood academically. . . . While most teachers believe that standards and testing are needed in some form, only 18 percent in one national survey said that the exams they face are meaningful and used well by their districts. Eighty-five percent of the members of the nation’s largest teachers’ union believe there is too much reliance on standardized testing. Seventy-eight percent want changes to No Child Left Behind. They don’t feel this way because they are lazy, dim, or unconcerned about children. They feel this way because they know what the tests tell us, and what they don’t.

—TESTED, 201

- Do you agree or disagree with Perlstein’s description. Why or why not?
- Deborah Meier argues that it would be better to have the adults in each local school making the important decisions about what happens in that school and its classrooms. Do you agree or disagree and why or why not?

III. Respond

Mike Rose, professor in the Graduate School of Education at UCLA, recently wrote a new preface for a 2006 reprinting of his wonderful 1995 book, *Possible Lives*, the story of visits to schools all across the United States. Review together the following quote from the new preface and discuss the questions that follow.

This book is a documentary of the possible, recorded from a journey through America’s public schools. The good classroom is the focal point of the journey, and we will spend time in many of them, learning about our children, their teachers, the surrounding communities, and the idea of public education. In doing so, we will learn about America itself. . . . Schools are embedded in particular places, in communities. For all the features schools and communities share . . . life within classrooms is profoundly affected by the immediate life outside. Visiting, as you will, a one-room schoolhouse in rural Montana or a crowded high school in Chicago, you’ll see so much in the routines and the curriculum that does hold steady across sites—the grammar of schooling. Yet within that grammar lie differences. . . . It is in these differences, the differences of place, that make each school, each classroom, just a bit distinct from the next. . . . As . . . the reader moves from school to different school, the collective details begin to give a palpable sense of what it means to have distributed across a nation, available by law to all, a public educational system to provide the opportunity for such intellectual development. All these moments of thinking and learning, community by community, become another kind of landscape, parallel to rockface and highway, a terrain of mass cognitive possibility.

—Mike Rose, *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), pp. xiii-xv.

- How are the philosophy of standards that underpins NCLB and the story of Tyler Heights Elementary School, as described in *TESTED*, different from what Rose describes in his new preface to *Possible Lives*?
- What do you think are the reasons the standards movement has become so very popular?



- As a person of faith, are you more comfortable with the picture of public education that Mike Rose paints in his preface or with the picture of education that Linda Perlstein paints in *TESTED*? Take some to consider why and then explain your reasons and listen to the thinking of others.

As we affirm the importance of public education as a vital civic institution, we cannot ignore that schools need to be improved.

- Make a list of concrete steps that you think would improve opportunity for the children at Tyler Heights Elementary School.
- For the educators—What five steps do you believe would improve opportunity in schools serving poor children?
- How do (1) family income and (2) school funding affect opportunity?
- Think about these disparities as you consider together the contrast (in Chapter 11 of *TESTED*) between Tyler Heights Elementary School and Crofton Elementary School, which is also located in Anne Arundel County, Maryland. In your own state do you see more or less evidence of funding inequity than you see in *TESTED*?

We also need to consider that poverty brings many challenges for children that schools themselves cannot address. Consider the following quote from the National Council of Churches General Assembly policy statement (passed 1999) on public education then discuss the questions that follow.

Too often, criticism of the public schools fails to reflect our present societal complexity. At a moment when childhood poverty is shamefully widespread, when many families are under constant stress, when schools are often limited by lack of funds or resources, criticism of the public schools often ignores an essential truth: we cannot believe that we can improve the public schools by concentrating on the schools alone. They alone can neither cause nor cure the problems we face. In this context, we must address with prayerful determination the issues of race and class, which threaten both public education and democracy in America.

—*The Churches and the Public Schools at the Close of the Twentieth Century*, NCC Policy Statement, November 11, 1999.

- What are five social reforms on which your group can agree that would likely support higher achievement in public schools?
- Can you find a way to collaborate with others in your congregation or your community to ensure that children’s social service and health needs are considered together with their education needs? How can you find a way to help connect the dots?

IV. Learn more about No Child Left Behind

[Leaders: you may want to provide the Web addresses or copies of these resources before this session, so that participants can be prepared ahead of time for discussion.]

To become better informed about the problems in the No Child Left Behind Act, review together one or more of the following resources from the National Council of Churches website, which provide concise summaries of the issues.



1. **Ten Moral Concerns in the No Child Left Behind Act**
<http://www.ncccusa.org/pdfs/tenmoralconcernsrevised.pdf>
2. **Redefining the Federal Role in Education as NCLB Is Reauthorized**
<http://www.ncccusa.org/pdfs/redefiningnochildleftbehind.pdf>
3. **Questions on NCLB for Candidates in the 2008 Federal Elections**
<http://www.ncccusa.org/pdfs/candidatesquestions.pdf>
4. **The NCC Children and the Church Policy Statement**
<http://www.ncccusa.org/generalassembly/ga2004/churchandchildren.pdf> and accompanying Study Guide
<http://www.ncccusa.org/pdfs/churchandchildren.pdf> .



V. Decide What Steps to Take as a Result of this Conversation

Invite participants to this action step as follows:

We gave read and discussed TESTED. We have explored additional resources, listened to each other, and heard the responses of the public school educators in our congregation. It is time to consider what we feel called to do as a result of our study.

Consider the following ideas then work together to make some plans:

- Learn more by asking the children and youth in your congregation how their school handles standardized testing. (E.g. Does their school make a big deal of standardized tests?)
- Write a letter or make a call to your Congressperson and Senators to express two or three concerns. The resources listed above can help you compose a concise, clear letter or see the model letter in the appendix.
- Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper.
- Engage a broader conversation with other groups in your community, including PTA, members of the board of education and/or other civic organizations.
- Attend a candidates' forum; sponsor a candidates' forum; gather a group to meet with a Congressperson or Senator at the local office. Be sure to take professional educators as part of the group. Clearly express your concerns along with your point of view as a person of faith.



Appendix

Suggested Outline for Sessions

GATHERING

Spend a few moments at the beginning of each session connecting with one another, exploring responses to previous sessions, or engaging in whatever sharing/process is traditional for you.

Share an opening prayer together, such as:

Dear God, we are grateful for those gathered here to reflect on the way we care for our children, for while we try to show our love by expecting much, we sometimes make unreasonable demands. We need you to help us—to open our eyes and our ears and our hearts.

We confess that in the midst of our busy lives, we sometimes forget to pay attention to the complicated effects of the laws that our representatives pass on our behalf. When policies don't work out as promised, then we wonder how it could have happened, and we feel paralyzed as we wonder what to do. We forget that our own choices can make a difference, and that if a law has unintended consequences, it is up to us to tell the truth about what is happening and insist on reform.

We live in such a time as this, O God. Our federal education law is affecting our children and their teachers and their schools in ways we too little understand. We pray for a sacred conversation. Help us in this time we have together to learn by reading, sharing, and listening to those who bring direct experience with children and schools.

May we honor these educators, who devote their lives to our children, by listening to their experiences. Let us also learn from the book we have chosen to read together and then find ways to speak the truth in love to those empowered to make a better society for our children.

Shape our understanding and our actions on behalf of children today as they deserve to thrive during childhood. Empower us to help reform schools to better prepare our children for that day when they will assume the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship.

This is our prayer. In the name of your son, the great teacher, Jesus Christ, Amen.

DISCUSSION

- At the start of your study, you may want to covenant together or set up some rules of discussion that will help keep your sessions productive and respectful. Simple rules of discussion could include: using I statements; listening to one another without judging, arguing with, or “fixing” one another’s perspectives; limiting speaking to 3 minutes at a time or limiting number of times each person speaks to make sure more reserved folk get a chance to be heard.
- Select the questions you would like to focus on for the session.
- Consider a variety of ways to present the questions. For example, do you want to read the questions aloud or print them out?
- Consider a variety of ways for participants to respond. While group discussion is always popular, pairing up for particular questions can allow for more in depth discussion. Likewise, allowing some time for quiet reflection prior to speaking and providing alternatives to talking, such as drawing or writing, can help make this time meaningful and transformational.

CLOSING

- Provide some preparation for what’s coming up or perhaps encourage participants to review specific sections of *TESTED* before the next session.
- Give participants a chance to weigh in on how things are going: Are they finding the discussion meaningful? Do they feel as though the rules of discussion are being followed? What suggestions do they have to enhance your time together?
- Close in prayer or in another ritual that suits the day’s content and your setting.



(B) Sample Letter to Congress

Dear [Senator or Representative]

As a person of faith I want you to know that justice in public education is much on my mind during this election year.

Thank you for your attention to the needs of our children and their schools in this time as Congress has been discussing the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Because I do not support a philosophy of test-and-punish, I look for a more carefully considered role for the federal government in federal education policy.

Many of my concerns grow from the excessive use of standardized testing in NCLB. I do not view children as products to be tested and managed. I support the use of growth models and multiple forms of assessment, and I ask you, while setting high standards, to develop policy that values the accomplishments of all children and their schools. Please find a way to set high expectations for all children while at the same time eliminating the unrealistic goal of universal proficiency by 2014.

My second area of serious concern is about the pressure of raising standardized test scores in basic skills only... in reading and math. In many schools such pressure has dangerously narrowed the curriculum to the subjects being tested. As a person of faith I view each child as a unique human being, created in the image of God, to be nurtured and educated. I ask you to emphasize the formation of the whole child by fully developing each child's gifts—intellectual, physical, civic, psychological, and ethical. Require a rich curriculum that includes reading, math, the humanities, the sciences, the social studies and the arts.

A third concern for me is the under-funding of NCLB by the federal government. Having authorized additional funding, Congress has never met its commitment to the states by appropriating what has been authorized. I ask you fully to fund the mandates of this law. I ask you also to use the leverage of federal power to expand educational opportunity by pressing states to address school funding inequity. The United States is a society with pockets of deep poverty and other pockets of astounding affluence. NCLB has been a double blow because it imposes sanctions without equalizing resources and opportunity. Please reduce sanctions that privatize services by directing public tax dollars away from the public schools.

Although NCLB culminates our society's growing computerized capability to measure and quantify, education remains primarily qualitative—the establishment of trust between teacher and child—the development of community within and beyond the school. I ask you to change NCLB to uphold high expectations for all children but honor every child's accomplishments; shift the focus from punishing public schools to strengthening them; reduce high stakes testing; and fully fund the law.

Most sincerely,



National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy

For more information, contact: **Jan Resseger** (chair)

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<http://www.nccusa.org/elmc/specialministries.htm#anchorwgpel>