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## Putting Political Spectacle to Work: Understanding Local Resistance to the Common Core

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**Abstract:** In the fall of 2013, a parents' group formed to protest the new Common Core based mathematics textbook recently adopted by their school district. Quickly allying with teachers, the new coalition began to, "hammer," the district to drop the Common Core and return to more traditional texts and pedagogies. They did so by speaking at Governing Board meetings, participating in interviews with local newspapers, appearing on a local radio talk show, and forming social media accounts. This intrinsically motivated case study uses qualitative media analysis to examine the texts produced from these and other public declarations to better understand local policy formation through the mechanics of "political spectacle." Political spectacle theory suggests that policy may be formed through dramatic public displays and that policy formed from such spectacles often undemocratically reinforces existing inequalities. The study analyzes the parent, teacher and administration policy actors' use of political spectacle elements such as symbolic language, construction of problems, casting of enemies and allies and distinctions between onstage and backstage drama to understand the adoption, challenge and ultimate rejection of a Common Core based mathematics text in a mid-sized southwestern United States School district.

**Keywords:** Political spectacle; policy; Common Core; leadership; reform

### **El rol del espectáculo político: Para entender la resistencia local al Common Core**

**Resumen:** En el otoño de 2013, un grupo de padres se reunió para protestar el nuevo programa Common Core, cuyo libro de texto matemático había sido adoptado recientemente por su distrito escolar. Después de aliarse con maestros, la nueva coalición empezó a presionar el distrito para que abandonen el Common Core y regresen a textos y pedagogías más tradicionales. Para cumplir esto, hablaron en las reuniones del Consejo Directivos de distritos escolares, participaron en entrevistas dadas por periódicos locales, aparecieron en un show de radio local, y formaron cuentas de media social. Este estudio de caso, motivado intrínsecamente, utiliza el análisis de media cualitativa para examinar los textos producidos de estas y otras declaraciones públicas en cuanto a entender la creación de política local a través de la mecánica del “espectáculo público”. La teoría del espectáculo público sugiere que la política podría formarse a través de dramáticas muestras públicas y que estas políticas frecuentemente refuerzan la desigualdades antidemocrática y ya existente. Para entender el uso, desafío y rechazo de un libro de texto matemático basado en Common Core en un distrito escolar de medio tamaños en suroeste de los Estados Unidos, este estudio analiza el uso de los elementos del espectáculo político como lenguaje simbólico; la construcción de problemas; el papel de enemigos y aliadas; y distinciones entre el drama pública y privada.

**Palabras-clave:** Espectáculo político; político; Common Core; liderazgo; reforma

### **O papel do espetáculo política: Para entender a resistência local para o Common Core**

**Resumo:** No outono de 2013, um grupo de pais se reuniram para protestar contra o novo Common Core, cujo livro de texto matemático foi recentemente aprovada pelo distrito escolar. Depois de aliar-se com os professores, a nova coalizão começou a pressionar o distrito a deixar o Common Core e voltar para os textos e pedagogias mais tradicionais. Para conseguir isso, eles falaram nas reuniões do Conselhos de distritos escolares, participaram de entrevistas dadas pelos jornais locais, apareceram em um programa de rádio local, e formaram contas de mídia social. Este estudo de caso, intrinsecamente motivado, utiliza a análise qualitativa para examinar textos qualitativos produzidos por estas e outras declarações públicas para entender a criação da política local por meio de uma mecânica do “espetáculo público”. A teoria espetáculo público sugere que a política poderia ser formada através de um drama público e que estas políticas muitas vezes reforçam a desigualdade antidemocrático e já existente. Para entender o uso, desafio e rejeição de um livro de texto matemático baseado em Common Core em um distrito escolar de tamanho médio em o sudoeste dos Estados Unidos, este estudo analisa o uso de elementos do espetáculo político como a linguagem simbólica; a construção de problemas; o papel de inimigos e aliados; e as distinções entre o drama público e privado.

**Palavras-chave:** Espetáculo político; política; Common Core; liderança; reforma

## Introduction

It's basically a travesty, he said. The kids are not being engaged; the teachers are frustrated; and the scores are plummeting. We formed the coalition to start hammering the.... school district.

*-A parent's view on a Common Core Math textbook as quoted in the local newspaper*

In response to the new expectations and demands of the Common Core state standards, one unified school district in the Southwestern United States embarked on a system-wide textbook adoption. The adoption resulted in brand-new Common Core based texts being implemented across the Math and English Language Arts curriculums comprehensively from kindergarten through the twelfth grade. The change affected all of the district's 16,000 students. Adopted by the district's Governing Board in the spring, students and teachers received their new materials several months later for implementation in the fall semester.

The implementation was not peaceful. A local newspaper succinctly summarized the controversy by reporting, "A parents' group has formed to protest." The article continued by sharing that the coalition with 80 members is, "pressuring the district to change course," by rejecting the Common Core State Standards. This new Coalition of parents and the teachers allied with them focused their outrage primarily at the new math text adopted for use in the district's three high schools and five middle schools. They claimed and the newspaper reported that the textbook was, "inadequate," and, "stifled teachers' abilities to teach the way they like." They objected to the textbook's focus on, "too much theory," that gave students, "too little direction." The Coalition promised to, "give voice to those parents who want one," with the goal of restoring the more traditional methods used prior to the Common Core text adoption. As one parent said during a radio talk show appearance, "If we have something that is doing really good, why are you changing it?" The Coalition hammered the district through speeches at Governing Board meetings, quotes in the local newspapers, an appearance on a local radio talk show, and the publication of their own Coalition social media pages. They made their voice heard and in doing so added to the complexity of interactions and ideas formulating district policy.

Modern educational policy research suggests policy forms from these complex interactions and results in freedoms or restraints on individual agency to act. Ball (1993, 2015); Braun, Ball, Maguire and Hoskins (2011); and Sobe (2015) agree that these complex assemblages find form in the text of written and practiced policy. But despite modern research's general understanding of policy formation's complexity and struggle of interactions, the specific processes that produce, modify and even abandon policies remains an area for further exploration. The theory of political spectacle (Edelman, 1988) provides one analytic tool to that shines light into the black box theater of policy formation. Political theorist Murray Edelman suggested ideologically motivated actors create policy through the "spectacle" of dramatic public displays. Edelman recognized the reality of a powerful mass media as personified by the nation's president at the time, a former movie actor by trade, and explored themes of symbolism, problem definition and construction, and leadership's use of created enemies and allies in gaining the public's support, or acquiescence, for specific policies. Often, policies created through these constructed "spectacles" reinforced existing societal inequalities that benefited the already powerful.

Political spectacle theory has been utilized and expanded upon by educational policy researchers who likewise share Edelman's concern with the ascendancy of neo-liberal, neo-conservative and other "New Right" (Apple, 2000; Ylimaki, 2011) type discourses and their resultant

policies. Mary Lee Smith, Linda Miller-Kahn, Walter Heinecke, and Patricia Jarvis (2004) go so far as to suggest that modern educational policy has devolved into a political spectacle that threatens the very fate of American schools. Sometimes these educational spectacles take the form of politicians or educational technocrats of the new middle class initiating policy changes while intentionally disengaging the public. In other cases, (Miller-Kahn & Smith, 2001; Rodwell, 2011) relatively small but powerful groups of affluent citizens create their own spectacles by re-defining and re-constructing educational problems, casting their own enemies and allies, forming their own symbols and seeking alternate policy solutions. In these spectacles, it is the educational leadership rather than the public that ultimately acquiesces to new policy courses that still disproportionately benefit society's already powerful segments.

In this case study (Creswell, 1998, Stake, 1995), I explore both the district leadership's attempts to adopt and implement a new textbook and the techniques used by the coalition of parents and teachers who dramatically opposed it. I share Murray Edelman's, Mary Lee Smith's, Linda Miller-Kahn's, and others' interest in how the mechanics of political spectacle can be utilized in an era dominated by the ascendancy of a "new right" ideology. Gary Anderson (2007) wrote, "Those who want defend the public sphere, a common good, and a more equal society must become more aware of how spectacle is constructed" (p. 117). I agree and therefore seek to understand how the elements of political spectacle as described by Edelman (1988) and refined by Smith, et al. (2004) are used to create, challenge, modify and reject local educational policy. Particularly, how do leaders define problems, use symbols, cast enemies and allies, and utilize stages to achieve their policy objectives?

My interest in this particular case intrinsically originates (Stake, 1995) from my unique position within this spectacle. I was the principal at the high school from which the Coalition's parent and teacher leadership emerged. Much political spectacle literature is necessarily formed from the perspective of a researcher, "looking in," at the spectacle trying to discern the action that is happening backstage, out of the public eye (Koyama, 2013; Rodwell, 2011; Winton, 2010). Because of my positioning, I take an opposite approach by focusing on the scripts performed on public stages to achieve policy objectives. I do so through qualitative media analysis (Altheide and Schneider, 2013) of the documents produced from the policy actors' public displays as they perform their drama on multiple stages including Governing Board meetings and both social and traditional media. My unique positioning does, however, inform my analysis and assessment of particular public statements. I hope the analysis sheds light on the usefulness of political spectacle theory for understanding local policy formations. Additionally, I hope the understanding gained from this case analysis can benefit local educational leaders navigate the local dramas in which they find themselves cast.

## **Political Spectacle Theory and Practice in a New Right Era**

The opposition to Common Core generally and the decisions made by local educational authorities specifically illustrate the complexity of educational policy creation and enactment. Modern educational policy research suggests policy forms as a complex interaction, an assemblage, of ideas. Ball (1993, 2015), Braun, Ball, Maguire and Hoskins (2011), and Sobe (2014) agree that policy is a text, but only on the surface. More properly understood, policy is the production of truth produced by discourses regarding what can be said and taught with what authority. Policy does not therefore resemble the ancient ten commandments handed from the mountain top, but is built from the interactions of diverse and changing ideas about freedom and constraints against that freedom.

While the brief vignette regarding this district's struggle with textbook adoption already suggests that policy is indeed formed through the complex interactions regarding individual agency and restriction on that agency (Ball; 1993, 2015), how those interactions occur remains an area for further exploration. The theory of political spectacle provides an analytic tool to address this complex black box. Essentially, political spectacle argues that policy is created through dramatic public displays that result in the reinforcement of existing social inequities. Political spectacle was first proposed by political scientist Murray Edelman (1988). Edelman argued that American politics is characterized by "spectacle" that distorts modern policy making from its classical democratic roots. Instead of reasoned debate based on objective facts resulting in the democratic and equitable results, the political spectacle suggests elites manipulate the public through ideological and symbolically dramatic displays, in other words "spectacles," that drive policy formation to their own benefit (DeCanio, 2005).

Writing in the late 1980's at a time when conservative ideology was ascendant and embodied in the political persona of a movie actor turned United States President, Edelman noted the proliferation of news media the likes of which democracy had never before seen, but noted that the average citizen seemed disengaged from politics. Instead of utilizing the information the mass media provided to be active in policy formation, the average citizen in Edelman's view accepted the "hyper-reality" of politicians acting as policy makers on the stage television provided. Policy formation became analogous to watching one's favorite sports team on Sunday afternoon or television drama on Tuesday night wherein a few would perform on the stage while the majority watched the action. Further, just as success on the athletic playing field often represented hard work in the training room and practice field, so the real work of policy formation occurred outside of public view in negotiations behind closed doors by elite policy makers. In an era of mass communication where information should drive active citizen engagement, Edelman darkly noted the opposite was occurring as citizens "quiescently" accepted leadership's public constructions of and solutions to problems that usually reinforced existing societal inequalities.

Since Edelman proposed the political spectacle, the theory has been explored and utilized by educational leadership and policy researchers such as Smith, Miller-Kahn, Heinecke and Jarvis (2004). While Edelman focused on politics in general; Smith, et al., focus on educational policy and the roles schools should play in a democratic society. They argue that the political spectacle can be seen in the, "dramatic displays that characterize education policy," and suggest that democracy is "poorly served" by the political spectacle that has come to characterize so many policy decisions (p. x). From these similar philosophic foundations, Smith, et al., clarifies and simplifies Edelman's political spectacle theory into a multi-point framework for understanding these dramatic displays. Both discuss how problems are differently constructed and then represented by differing symbols, the role of ideology in those problems' construction, the construction of leadership and the casting of allies and enemies, and the use of various stages upon which the dramaturgy is performed. Spectacle produced policy, being symbolic, also often had a disconnection between the stated goals and the financial means provided to reach those goals. Smith, et al., also discuss the roles of academic research, polling, democratic participation as an illusion, and democratic participation as an illusion; however, I will focus here on the areas of substantial overlap between Smith, et al., and Edelman.

### **Elements of the Political Spectacle's Construction**

Every drama requires a script and political spectacle's is found in the policy actor's language. Both Edelman and Smith focus on how language is utilized to define and construct problems that leadership can then solve, utilizing symbolic language. Symbolic language itself can take different

forms, however. On one hand, Smith, et al., suggest one form of symbolic language, the language of ambiguity. Policy actors can utilize deliberately vague language that can be interpreted in multiple ways by multiple audiences. Hence in the political spectacle, words like, “accountability,” “freedom of choice,” and, “high standards,” become vague symbolic scripts in the same manner other politicians may talk about, “patriotism,” or, “compassion.” (p. 12) The language of ambiguous symbolism carries the benefit of appealing to multiple audiences who may have diverse and even competing mindsets regarding these concepts. Further, the language of ambiguous symbols also possesses the benefit of being hard to argue against. Who would support, “low expectations,” by arguing against, “high standards?” On the other hand, Edelman suggests a differing but complementary view of symbolic language. Some symbols are concrete, material, even tangible artifacts that give the world specific meaning. Edelman explains, “The language, rituals, and objects to which people respond are not abstract ideas. If they matter at all, it is because they are accepted as basic to the quality of life.” (1988, p. 8) So, a concrete symbol can take the form of a flag, or even a textbook, and like its ambiguous cousin, the concrete symbol can evoke different meanings from different audiences depending on how the individual constructs the problem.

How an actor constructs a problem arises from that individual’s ideological starting point. Put another way, how a problem is conceived and conveyed is not an objective reality rooted in objective facts, but is instead an artifice constructed from the experiences, perceptions and even biases of those joined in any given community (Porter, 1995). Both Edelman (1988) and Smith, et al., (2004) and followed later by Anderson (2007), lamented the rise of conservative ideology at the expense of the values of local community, equality, and the common good. Apple (2000) defined this conservative ideology as composed from four loosely allied components. Neo-Liberals represent dominant economic elites’ intent on modernization and the use of markets to solve social problems including educational ones. Neo-Conservatives emphasize a return to cultural values of “high standards” and “real” knowledge. Authoritarian Populists, composed largely of middle and working class groups, promote traditional and fundamentalist religious values. Finally, the Professional New Middle Class is composed of the technocrats who use their management expertise in leading schools to high levels of achievement. Ylimaki (2011) further explicates these new middle class educational technocrats as leaders such as principals and superintendents who meet the mandates of student achievement through the purchase and implementation of packaged programs. She contrasts these “new professional” curriculum leaders as successful yet distinct from “critical curriculum leaders” who also achieve success but do so through building curriculums that are responsive to the cultural needs of their communities. As Ylimaki critiques the professional new middle class as representing ideological interests that may not best serve their unique communities, Apple likewise suggests the technocrats disconnect from their communities as their own, “professional interests and advancement,” depend on their use of accountability and efficiency techniques.

The ideological environment composes the milieu in which any modern political spectacle is performed, but in specific policy spectacles, actors will choose a stage or stages upon which to act. Edelman focused primarily on national politics and the availability of the mass market television stage. In today’s local politics, stages can be more complex and include traditional media such as radio, television, and newspapers but also can include the relatively recently developed stages of the internet and social media. Also, as seen in some of Smith, et al.’s (2004), examples, localized spectacles can also occur on the stage of local school governing board meetings may provide. Finally, not all stages may be visible. In any dramatic production, what is seen by the public onstage is often scripted, organized, and even controlled by actors backstage. Smith, et al., provide further insight into this distinction by asking, “Who reaps the benefits and who bears the burdens and costs of a policy?” (2004, p. 31) In the political spectacle, onstage public action is often characterized by

symbolic language while the real decisions, such as the allocations of public funds, are made by a few elite actors meeting backstage behind closed doors.

Because the allocation of those public resources may not benefit everyone, leaders will often carefully construct and cast others into the roles of allies or enemies. In a way, the use of allies and enemies returns the political spectacle's construction back to its origin, symbolic politics, as leaders, their allies, and their enemies become living symbols representing the experienced world. As Edelman wrote, "The term 'leadership' (like the terms 'problem' and 'enemy') is itself a political weapon." (1988, p. 64) Leaders, along with the enemies and allies they cast, become identified with courses of action and inaction. They represent the aspirations or fears of those watching the spectacle. And perhaps most importantly, they do not always get to choose into which role they are cast nor are those roles static. Leaders may find themselves allied or enemies as political coalitions form, change, dissolve and reform.

### Qualitative Educational Political Spectacle Literature

Edelman focused primarily on his theory offering little in the way of qualitative support (Fenster, 2005 and 2007; Wisniewski, 2007). Educational researchers, however, have developed a body of literature addressing the political spectacle. In what might be the earliest application of political spectacle to educational research, Kliebard (1992) argues the entire United States' vocational education program was little more than a symbolic move by educational elites to justify education's continued relevance in the face of industrialization. Wright (2005) examines the case of Proposition 203, a statewide initiative in Arizona that places restrictions on the education of bilingual and English language learning students. Winton (2010) explores political spectacle in the formation of character education policy in Ontario, Canada. Anderson (2007) uses political spectacle to understand the media's impact on educational policy. Koyama includes elements of political spectacle in multiple policy analyses including the role of "global scare tactics" in influencing American educational accountability reform (2013), the role of principals as *bricoleurs* in responding to accountability efforts (2014) and addressing accountability efforts themselves as example of political spectacle (Koyama and Kania, 2014). All of these political spectacle studies explore spectacle as a carefully stage-managed construction created by politicians and educational administrators. In each of these spectacles, the public has acquiesced to the leadership's policy solutions.

Other educational political spectacle literature takes the concept of spectacle in a different direction by exploring what happens when the public does *not* quiescently support leadership's proposed policy. In these cases, quiescence still occurs, but it often is the educational establishment that acquiesces to the outraged citizens. However, these examples of acquiescence do still often reinforce existing unequal privileges and authority as happened when parents resisted progressive educational reforms in Colorado (Miller-Kahn and Smith, 2001). Rodwell's (2011) study of the Australian state of Tasmania's also explores this plot twist. Working with a willing media, citizen leaders created an outrage and then worked to connect parents and teachers together in a coalition opposing the educational leadership's proposed reform. Further elements of parent resistance can also be seen in Smith, et al.'s (2004) study of parent resistance to a magnet school's creation in Arizona.

Likewise, this study explores the spectacle created when the public, or in this case a segment of the district's public, actively and dramatically opposed the educational leadership's proposed reform. Anderson (2007) explored how neo-liberals seeking a conservative agenda of school choice at the expense of strong community schools utilized political spectacle to achieve their policy goals. Anderson suggested that those interested in developing strong community schools might benefit

from studying and appropriating neo-liberal methods to more progressive ends by understanding the mechanics of political spectacle, the constituencies involved in spectacle, and who ultimately benefits from the spectacle. Particularly, I use Edelman's (1988) and Smith, et al.'s (2004) constructions of political spectacle to analyze how leaders define problems, use symbols, cast enemies and allies, and utilize stages to achieve their policy objectives. This study examines these issues through the case of parental resistance to their district's math instructional reform specifically and by extension the national Common Core standards reform generally.

### The Case's Milieu, Perspective, and Methods

This policy-centered case study (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995) examines the politics within a local school district generated when the district acted to implement the Common Core State Standards. Specifically, the district's attempt to implement new Common Core based mathematics instructional materials created the impetus for community resistance involving parents, teachers and even students. This section explores the federal and state context of the district's decision to adopt new Common Core based textbooks, explicates my role as principal at one of the affected schools, and details research methods.

The national reform movement of the Common Core creates the milieu from which this particular case emerged. Around the time this case's drama was approaching its denouement, the national media was reporting, "For some, the Common Core State Standards seemed to come from nowhere, and appeared to be a sneaky attack on states' rights to control education." (Bidwell, 2014) Whether or not they were actually sneaky, the Common Core State Standards were a complex effort led by the National Governors' Association to adopt a nation-wide set of academic standards. For proponents, these standards would help ensure American world leadership in innovation and globalized (Hicks, 2004) competition. While not "national" in the sense that that they were adopted or imposed by the federal government, the standards became a de facto national effort as almost all of the 50 states individually adopted the standards. That being said, President Barak Obama's financial incentives through his *Race to the Top Initiative*, itself proposed during one of the nation's worst financial crises, encouraged the states' rapid adoptions perhaps in contradiction to the President's stated interests in democratic communities (Giroux, 2009).

As a reform effort, the new standards created challenges as the standards were more rigorous than many state's existing standards. A vice-president of the Business Roundtable summarized these higher expectations when he told *U.S. News and World Report*:

"What's more important? To tell the truth to parents about where their kids are really performing? Or to continue to make them believe they're doing really well, only until they get into the workforce or go to college and they're finding out they need to be put in a remedial English class?" (quoted in Bidwell, 2014)

These remarks echo those of United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's comments from the fall of 2013, a time coincidental to the height of this case's public drama. Secretary Duncan stated to a meeting of the State School Superintendents that he was, "fascinated," that, "some of the pushback," against the Common Core was coming from, "white suburban moms," who were suddenly realizing, "their child is not as brilliant as they thought they were." (Fox News, 2013; Strauss, 2013)

Not only would the Common Core therefore mandate higher expectations, but these expectations would also be measured through new standardized testing then being developed by two federally funded consortiums the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers



(PARCC) and Smarter Balance. These testing results would allow national comparison of student achievement and by implication how well teachers and principals were doing educating students. In this particular district's state, that assessment took the form of school "grades" issued by the state and widely reported by the press. Even closer to home, state law mandated that teacher and principal professional evaluations be composed of at least 50 percent quantitative data such as scores from state standardized testing. Student's high school graduation and post-secondary opportunities would also be impacted.

This then is the context in which a unified school district in a metropolitan area in the Southwestern United States found itself. The district includes three high schools. Two of the high schools each served about 1,800 students primarily drawn from the suburbs. Both high schools enjoyed a significant portion of students who took advantage of the state's open-enrollment policies and enrolled across district boundaries while a small percentage of the enrollment also came from neighboring rural areas to the north. Competition from charter schools, including a high-school charter that had achieved national media attention for its students' performance on standardized tests, was a new community development.

A drive through the suburban town easily demonstrates the history of American master-planned communities stretching back decades. The older of the two high schools draws students from suburbs built from the fifties through the eighties and feature the brick homes, many with swimming pools in the back, typical of the era. The other high school, built just after the turn of the new millennium, features the large stucco homes that were popular as the new millennium began. Swimming pools continued to abound. Golf courses form a major amenity for residents who typically hold jobs as engineers at the local defense missile manufacturer, bio-medical companies, and as owners of small businesses. It is from this newest area, also the district's most affluent, that the Coalition's leadership emerged and in which I served as principal.

As one heads south from the suburbs, the district narrows both geographically and economically. The district boundaries become closed in by other districts to the west, east and south giving the district a footprint vaguely resembling the letter "V." The suburbs give way to the inner city as dwellings become smaller, apartments rather than private swimming pools begin to abound while maintenance and repair standards decline. The district's third and oldest high school is also its smallest serving about 1,000 students. This high school is also a Title One school. While the suburban schools draw open-enrolled students, this high-school saw the open-enrollment flow heading the other way mainly to a highly-rated public high school located just a few miles away but across the district boundary line. Typical of American demographic patterns, this oldest high school also had the highest minority population with Hispanic students forming the largest demographic group. The high school's state standardized test scores were also notably lower than the suburban high schools.

All of the high schools were fed in a unified school district manner by middle and elementary schools. Altogether the district comprised 18 schools all supported through one district administration. The district administration offices and governing board meeting room were located in the district's southern, inner-city end, just a few miles from the Title One high school and across the street from multiple car dealerships. The district offices looked and felt like the repurposed elementary school they in fact are. With some imagination, one can picture the Governing Board meeting room as the elementary school cafeteria it once was. It is here that the Governing Board adopted the district's Common Core based text books.

As the principal of the district's largest high school located in its most affluent area, I had a real interest in seeing students succeed with the new Common Core standards as measured by the state's impending adoption of the PARCC assessment. The students' success on these exams would

determine their ability to graduate from high school and formed my primary professional motivation and therefore led to my acceptance of the district-wide textbook adoption. I also naturally had a management role in the texts' implementation at my school, a role I explore in more detail in the findings section. What I did not have, however, was input into the selection of the text or involvement in the "backstage" closed door meetings that occurred between parent and district level administration as the drama unfolded. For that, I was limited like everyone else to comments publicly made in Governing Board meetings or to the media.

These limitations combined with the emotional drama of parents and teachers speaking at Governing Board meetings influence the data collection as I am seeking to understand the public formation of political spectacle. Additionally, Stake (1988) discusses a case's boundaries as including the, "shared experience," of the actors involved. In this case, I am defining the shared experience as the opportunities for the district's general public to be involved including the Governing Board meeting in April, 2013 where the texts were adopted through the June, 2014 meeting where a replacement text for one high school was chosen. Data takes the form of publicly available documents that were collected starting in the Spring of 2014. Thus, some documents were retrieved in an archival manner and others collected in more or less real time. I should note that by the time data collection began, the public spectacle had largely subsided with most action occurring behind closed doors. In spectacle terms, these documents compose the policy actors' "onstage" script.

As the Governing Board meetings of November and December, 2013, form this spectacle's emotional high point, I began the data collection with these meetings' official minutes. Using progressive theoretical sampling (Altheide & Schneider, 2013), I accumulated additional documents illustrating the textbook adoption, implementation and controversy that included: other Governing Board meeting minutes, a pod-cast of a local-radio talk show appearance by parent leaders, articles from two separate local newspapers, a letter sent home from district administration to parents explaining the new texts, a power point presentation I gave at my own school, and the separate website and Facebook accounts created by the Coalition leadership. Because of my interest in the public construction of spectacle, all documents utilized are publicly available. For example, Governing Board minutes are available on the district website. I also only used Facebook statements from the Coalition leadership as identified by those who publicly spoke at Governing Board meetings or to the traditional media. As such, "backstage" dealings whether between the Coalition and district administration or among the Coalition itself, are only inferred by how the participating actors later publicly portrayed those meetings.

Each document was then analyzed according to a media analysis protocol (Altheide & Schneider, 2013) that utilized Smith, et al.'s (2004) political spectacle framework: symbolic language, casting of allies and enemies, dramaturgy of stages and props, democratic participation as an illusion, polling, illusion of rationality, disconnection of means and ends, and the distinction between onstage and backstage action. As analysis progressed, I added information regarding the policy actors and the role of quiescence to the protocol. I also approach the case from the two perspectives suggested in previous educational political spectacle literature in that I analyze both the administration's adoption of the texts and the public's subsequent reaction alike through the lens of political spectacle. Together, these perspectives form a story that begins with the text's adoption, rises through the text's implementation, climaxes late in the fall semester, and then declines to the denouement of Governing Board acquiescence to the adoption of an additional math text.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Exposition – The Adoption**

The Governing Board adopted the texts at a regularly scheduled meeting in April, 2013. The meeting's agenda covered three major sections consisting of an executive session for student discipline regarding long-term suspensions and expulsions; an informational items and recognitions sections that included issues related to, "instructional space portables replacement," along with district, "distinguished service awards;" and finally, the consent agenda. The consent agenda alone had 17 separate items including item P, "Award of Contracts for K-12 Textbook Adoptions for Math and Reading Based on Response to Request for Proposal (RFP) 12-0024." Per the district's policy and practice, itself rooted in state law, the "consent agenda" items were voted on by the Governing Board in one block rather than as individual items and thus included "routine" items such as approval of gifts and donations, out-of-state travel requests, changes in employment status, and textbook adoptions.

In regards to this textbook adoption, listed as item P, the Governing Board was provided information by district administration in their "Board Book," outlining the process for this textbook adoption. The process began when, "Request for Proposal (RFP) 12-0024 was mailed to twenty-one (21) vendors providing Common Core Textbooks in the areas of Math and Reading. The District requested each vendor provide samples and a detailed response to address these points..." Fourteen different points of criteria were then provided starting with, "Demonstrated alignment with the Common Core Standards," and including criteria such as, "21<sup>st</sup> Century teaching and learning skills," and, "Authentic formative and summative assessments based on rubrics."

While the Board Book does not identify who created the 14 points of selection criteria, the Board's information does identify that separate committees existed for high school and elementary school English Language Arts text adoptions along with additional committees for high school and elementary school Math textbook adoptions. In total, four committees were formed. The Board Book and Meeting Minutes identified the four committee's members as completely composed with district teachers. In the case of the high school math committee, 14 teachers representing the district's high schools and middle schools participated. The Board's provided information continued with:

Committees met and reviewed all materials presented by the vendors against a rubric which detailed the requirements of the RFP and the Common Core Standards. Upon review of all vendor materials, the committee selected the top vendors for further consideration.

That further consideration involved:

Material samples appropriate to the grade levels from each top vendor were sent to every school in the district. Teachers of reading and mathematics at every school were given the opportunity to review the materials and score them against the requirements of the RFP and Common Core Standards for the content area... Each committee met for a consensus meeting where all data from the original reviews by the committee, data from reviews by teachers in every school, and data from the vendor presentations were considered. Comments were collected and the consensus decisions were documented. Best and Final requirements were sent to the selected top vendors.

Following the receipt of the Best and Final requirements, the soon-to-be adopted texts were put on public display at the Governing Board offices for the 60 days mandated by state law. The minutes do not include information regarding how many people actually reviewed the texts or what their comments were. One parent of an elementary school student, however, was present at the Governing Board meeting and requested to speak to the agenda item regarding these new texts. To accommodate this request to speak, a Governing Board member made a motion to remove the textbooks selection item from the remaining block of “consent agenda” items and to vote upon the selection separately. The motion was approved and the parent stated that she had spent two days reviewing the books and that she was thankful to the Governing Board for, “investing in our students.”

The Superintendent recommended the Governing Board adopt all four committee’s chosen texts. Thus in one move, all English and Math textbooks across the district from kindergarten through the senior year in high school were to be replaced for the upcoming school year starting four months later. In the case of high school math, the recommended text represented a very different approach to math than had been previously utilized. The text itself was not the typical hard-bound text intended to last for years. Instead, each student would be issued a soft-cover book that would be consumed over the course of the fall semester similar to a workbook. In the spring, each student would receive another consumable text. Teaching methods emphasized explanation and justification rather than practice, a pedagogical shift. The text also relied heavily on specialized tutorials students were expected to complete online; yet another shift for a district that had only recently acquired interactive whiteboards for most math classrooms. Student access to the internet was limited to several already existing computer labs of about thirty computers in each school. The Governing Board approved the recommended adoption on a unanimous five to zero “yes” vote with no recorded discussion or debate.

In some ways, the adoption of the texts represents a technically valid example of educators responding to a new context, in this case the mandates of the Common Core. Apple (2000) and Ylimaki (2011) might describe the process as one conceived and led by the “new public managers,” that is, educational experts utilizing their expertise to meet student needs effectively and efficiently. Created by district administrators and receiving input primarily from district teachers, the process involved technical requirements to be addressed in the original Request for Purchase, included proposals from 21 different vendors, was evaluated by representative committees of teachers and even allowed a 60 day public review as required by state law. The process resulted in new textbooks that presumably would better help students meet the Common Core’s expectations.

By following this process and adopting the new texts, the educational leadership also achieved a major goal of the political spectacle, the public’s acquiescence. Despite a significant and far-reaching change affecting every student and teacher in the district in two different core subjects, only one parent spoke at the Governing Board meeting at that parent spoke favorably to the change. Political spectacle theory, however, leads me to ask if that acquiescence is a result of genuine agreement with the new direction or the result of a carefully staged process designed to avoid the authentic public debate such a change might warrant. The textbook change, again encompassing Math and English texts from grades kindergarten through the senior year in high school, was included in the Governing Board’s agenda as the 16<sup>th</sup> item of a 17 item “consent agenda.” Consent agendas are, as defined in state law, to address routine matters in a group manner without individual item’s discussion or debate by the elected Governing Board. By design then, the text adoption was placed in the agenda in an area specifically created in law to minimize or even avoid discussion, debate or controversy.

Similarly, the absence of other actions may also suggest a carefully constructed process, or spectacle in Edelman's view, to minimize true discussion. While the texts were placed on public display at the Governing Board office for 60 days prior to adoption per state law, there does not appear to be any deliberate communication from the District to the community regarding the impending change or the texts' availability for public review and comment. Also, the location of the review, while again routine in the Governing Board's offices, might not fit this particular broad change. The Governing Board offices are not centrally located in the district's geography, but rather located in the extreme southern end of a district that stretches to the north. The district offices are also located in the inner-city portion of the district, relatively far removed from the suburban location of two-thirds of the district's high school students. Therefore, most the district's population would have to make a deliberate trip out their way and do so during work hours when the Governing Board offices are open in order to review the texts. These concerns combined with the absence of parents, students or community members on the textbook adoption committees were summarized at a much later Governing Board meeting, in March of 2014, where a parent suggested that the Governing Board, "...make policy changes that put quality control steps into the implementation-related mandates for things like textbook selection processes that would include parent-participation and input."

The first official communication with the district community took the form of a letter distributed to students at the start of the new school year, four months after the text adoption. District Administration provided a form letter they had written for site principals to place on their own school's letterhead, sign and distribute to students to take home. The letter began:

[The District] is reaching out with some important news about how [the State] is raising the bar to help your students receive a world-class education. We are implementing the [State] Common Core standards...The standards will help your child acquire the academic knowledge and skills he or she needs to be successful in college, career and life...With your support and partnership, these standards will better prepare your child to achieve in K-12 and beyond.

The letter proceeds to discuss how changes in employers' expectations require a change in the skills students develop to, "help their companies compete in the global marketplace." In order to do this, the state's, "best and brightest," leaders worked together to create the new state standards which were then, "benchmarked against countries with top-notch education programs, to ensure our future generations are ready to compete in the global marketplace." The standards would do so by requiring, "critical-thinking, problem solving, and effective communication skills." The letter summarized how parents can, "play a role," by, "setting high expectations and supporting your child's achievements in learning." Further, parents were encouraged to, "have a strong working relationship with your child's teacher through ongoing conversations regarding your child's progress." The final section of the one-page letter addresses how the district is prepared to teach the standards stating:

Our teachers are skilled, highly trained, and are prepared to teach the standards, with new materials to support them and your student's learning. This summer they had the opportunity to collaborate with other teachers in their grade level to prepare new and innovative lesson plans for your children.

The opportunity for teachers to collaborate and prepare innovative lesson plans refers to several days of professional development teachers were able to participate in during the summer. The workshops were geared to the Math and English teachers who would be starting the new year with

their new materials. Because teachers are not on contract during the summer, the District provided teachers who participated a daily addendum for their work. Participating teachers then spent time receiving a technical overview of their new textbooks from representatives of the publishing companies, time to practice with the new materials such as experience with online components, and concluded the several day workshops with time to collaboratively create new lessons using the materials. However, because of the timing during the summer and despite the additional addendum, not all district teachers actually participated and thus headed into the new year ill-informed of the expected changes. From my high school, only one Math teacher attended the entire workshop.

Considering this reality, the letter's one-sentence regarding the summer learning opportunity seems vague. While such vagueness may simply be related to the brevity of the one-page letter, political spectacle also thrives on symbolic language that lacks concrete specifics in favor of ambiguous word-choices. From this perspective, the letter seems full of words chosen precisely for their lack of precision. Words like, "success," "prepare," and, "achieve," form symbolic language as they allow multiple perspectives regarding what these might actually look like. Further, use of this symbolic language is hard to argue against. Who really does not want to their children to "achieve," and have, "success?" The new materials themselves, the concrete reason for the letter in the first place, are not concretely detailed. Missing is description of the new pedagogical expectations and online requirements of the new high school math materials. Instead, the new materials are generically associated with words including, "support," and, "innovative," which leave much to interpretation.

Symbolic language is closely related to how leadership constructs a problem. Again, this initial letter provides insights into how the district leadership constructed the problem that in turn compelled the adoption of these new textbooks. The Common Core Standards the district is implementing, as mandated by the State, will, "raise the bar," to a, "world-class education." With these new standards, "high expectations," are set and will help their children, "compete in the global marketplace." In constructing the problem this way, the district leadership is adopting a language of educational failure that in turn supports the leadership's solution, the adoption, purchase and implementation of a new program of textbooks across the K-12 English and Math curriculums. Implicit in the chosen language is the idea that previously expectations have been low leaving students unable to succeed in a global economy. The adoption of the new materials therefore is both concrete and simultaneously symbolic of the leadership's hopes for student success illustrating one of Edelman's concepts of symbols:

Symbols become that facet of experiencing the material world that gives it specific meaning. The language, rituals, and objects to which people respond are not abstract ideas. If they matter at all, it is because they are accepted as basic to the quality of life. (p. 8)

To the district leadership the new texts were concrete in that students would really have different books to hold and learn from but these new books were also simultaneously symbolic of the hope for creating better student success.

And the administration hoped they would not be alone in this endeavor. The letter states that, "We are implementing the [State] Common Core Standards," but goes on to tell parents the standards will help, "your child acquire the academic knowledge and skills," to be successful. In this opening statement, the letter is drawing a distinction between the professional educators, the "we" who are implementing the standards, and the "you" of the parents whose children will be successful with these standards. In one stroke, the administration is establishing itself as leaders in this endeavor while casting the parents as desired allies. Consider the language of another section, "The

standards will allow parents, students and teachers to be on the same page and set high expectations,” and, “At school, you can have a strong working relationship with your child’s teacher through ongoing conversations about your child’s progress.” By adding the concrete referent to, “your child’s progress,” the leadership maintains hope of allied parents, but at the same time, allies that recognize their supporting rather than leading role.

Unfortunately for the seamless implementation of the district’s chosen Common Core based instructional materials, a group of parents were already constructing their own view of educational problems. Their view began from a very different starting point, had its own set of symbolic interpretations, and a new set of leaders who would cast their own allies and enemies. Particularly, they targeted the high school math materials.

### **Rising Tension – One High School’s Implementation**

In retrospect, that the opposition to these new materials specifically and the Common Core generally seems almost a given from the day school started. At the time, however, my job of addressing teacher needs such as addressing concerns related to the extent to which their old materials could be used to supplement the new ones, questions about the new pedagogy, scheduling teacher training sessions with the publisher’s trainers, trying to fit the new math online requirements into three aging computer labs that were already being used to capacity prior to the new text’s adoption, and even trying to negotiate additional copy machine allowances seemed the normal price of a new program’s implementation.

In late September, about two months into the school year, the school’s parent organization asked me to speak about Common Core and the new instructional materials. Lacking a district provided template like the form letter sent home in early August, I created my own power point presentation. The evening of the meeting, held at the high school, I was surprised at the number of parents and even teachers who were in attendance. Despite a rather high level of parental involvement in various programs such as band and athletics, attendance at the monthly parent meetings was usually a scant dozen or so out of a school with almost 2,000 students. This evening, the room that seated 100 was relatively full. I addressed the changes in Math and English by providing an overview of “Why the Common Core?” that included statements such as, “Globalization and the Information Economy have increased the education and skills needed to succeed in a career as a citizen,” and, “Skills needed include identifying sophisticated problems and making crucial decisions.” I discussed key “shifts” from old standards to the new such as the need for “deep understanding,” “fluency,” and, “application,” in the new standards. I also summarized my understanding at that time of the upcoming new assessments then being developed by the Partnership for Assessment for College and Career (PARCC). These new assessments were expected to be more extensive and intensive than our current state standardized tests. I concluded by stating the district’s and the school’s, “commitment,” to, “implementing the Common Core State Standards, preparing students for successful completion of PARCC tests, and utilizing our instructional materials to achieve these goals.”

I recall that even by that time not everyone was on-board with the new materials, particularly in math. Yet, any change process can also take time for individuals to come along. I saw this as an opportunity to explain what was happening and in doing so bring others along. In political spectacle terms, I was hoping for acquiescence. My use of the words like, “commitment,” and, “our,” was designed to bring any reluctant parents and teachers along on the Common Core transition, persuade them as allies. Indeed, the entire 16 slide Power Point was designed to show how we as parents and educators are allied with others in responding to the pressures of globalization that forced this new Common Core expectations upon us. But not everyone acquiesced.

## **Rising Tension – The Coalition Emerges**

About six weeks later, the day of the November 12 Governing Board meeting, I heard some indications that the Board meeting might be exceptionally well attended and that not everyone would be pleased. Typically, Governing Board meetings were sparsely attended with only a few of the room's 75 seats taken. However, several times a year, the Board held special "recognition" meetings where various special awards and recognitions were provided. This meeting was just such a recognition meeting where district National Merit Semi-Finalists, district employee Distinguished Service Awards, a special Early Childhood Program offered at one of the three high schools, and all of the district's Parent/Teacher Organizations were to be honored. The normally empty Board room was packed with students, proud parents, and smiling district employees. Despite my speaking role in several of the recognitions, I joined other principals and parents in standing at the back of the room, the only space available. But I also noticed not all the parents seemed proud and not all the employees, especially the several math teachers from my high school, were smiling.

The Governing Board took their usual seats on the slightly raised dais at the room's front. The Superintendent also sat on the dais while other district administrators such the two associate superintendents and the chief financial officer sat at ground level tables facing the dais. To the Governing Board's right, parallel with the associate superintendents' tables, stood a podium with a microphone for those who might be addressing the Board.

Prior to the recognitions, per the standard order of the agenda, members of the public were invited to provide comment to the Governing Board. Any district citizen could address the Board for up to three minutes regarding any issue they believed warranted the Board's attention. One district resident rose and spoke critically of the expenses related to a program that prepares traditionally underrepresented students for success in higher education. Then, 11 parents and one student all individually rose in turn to, as recorded in the meeting's minutes, "state collective concerns related to the selection and implementation of the textbooks as part of the [new high school math curriculum] which began at the beginning of the 2013-2014 at [a district high school]. The minutes also noted that the student from that high school turned in a petition with nearly 600 signatures, "in support of teachers and rejecting the [new math materials]."

The board minutes limited the summary of who the speakers were to identifying them, three separate times, as all from one particular high school. An article appearing in a local newspaper the day after the meeting mostly agreed, "While the vast majority of the attendees were from [a high school]," but also added, "several parents of junior high students came to share their concerns for their learners' future." The news article provided further description, "Parents, who identified themselves respectfully as a software engineer, an astrophysicist, a computer programmer, and an electrical engineer, came forward to object to their children being used as guinea pigs in an experimental curriculum." While on the night of November 12 the parents spoke as parents, just a few days later they publicly joined forces with teachers in forming a new coalition complete with a web page and social media account. The new Coalition stated their interest in promoting, "student excellence," by bringing together:

civic minded individuals whose goal is to empower students, parents, educators and the community as a whole and ensure that we have a voice in the educational process. Co-founded by teachers and parents, our mission is to be involved in the educational decisions that affect students at the state, district, school, and classroom level.



Returning to the night of November 12, the parent speakers provided specifics of their opposition to the new math materials. As recorded in the Governing Board minutes the, “textbook does not show procedural methods,” and, “No examples are provided but rely on student self-discovery.” Parent’s ability to provide assistance with homework is, “limited.” Performance by students who, “previously excelled at math,” was, “declining.” There was, “lack of supplemental materials for teachers.” Parents also suggested administration was, “rigidly enforcing this new concept through intimidation, and prohibiting teacher autonomy in the classroom.” Several parents asked, “Why change from the previous pedagogy?” Others alluded to an upcoming budget override election with the intimation that the district should not be granted the additional funds such an election would provide. The speakers requested that the Governing Board further investigate these concerns and respond at the next Governing Board meeting.

The local newspaper article provided more details in an article appearing the next day. Summarizing the overall tone of the parents’ concerns, the paper quoted a parent, “The math program was excellent; why are they fixing something that doesn’t need to be fixed?” Another parent, identified as an electrical engineer, stated, “The curriculum is dysfunctional. At best, it is one third of a math curriculum. The district is forbidding teachers to teach fundamental math concepts and requiring them to use textbooks, after reviewing them, that are a total failure.” Part of that failure included, “Although parents were willing and ready to assist their children in learning the new math, they said the texts made it impossible,” as the texts lacked, “sufficient details and examples.” The paper also reported the theme of intimidation, “Not only were teachers not consulted or included in the adoption of the [Math Materials], they are fearful of losing their jobs if they don’t use it.”

Appearing on a local morning radio show a few weeks later, several parents again shared their concerns. As the show began, the hosts introduced the parents including a welcome to, “our good friend,” who was one of the guest parents. Speaking to the change in pedagogy the new Common Core math materials required, one parent explained:

Now the issue is the pedagogy is so different from anything we have ever seen in the classroom...It’s this whole think-pair-share discovery method which can work in limited capacity but what we are seeing is it replacing traditional teaching specifically in math where they are not learning formulas and not learning the language of math.

One of the two program hosts replied, “Ok, so far seems kinda dumb especially in high school. So what if I get the kid who eats paste?” Another parent described her efforts to help her son with math after he missed a day of school,

So I open it up and I’m trying to go through and they never finish a problem in the book. So how can I do this? And I couldn’t. So I said give me an odd number so I can look at the back and make sure I’m doing it right. There’s no answers in the back.

A third parent described his experience with the textbook as, “worthless,” and, “gobbledygook,” as, “It gave one little theorem then she had ten problems to do. That’s not acceptable.”

Through the show’s course, the specifics of this particular text adoption were related to the general perceptions of the Common Core. One host explained:

Common Core usurped state and local governments based on the dubious idea that the local groups can’t be trusted to understand and meet the standard without the federal government looking over their shoulder. Common Core was developed

without state legislators' involvement or authority, without curriculum or content specialists and it was never voted on by anybody.

The co-host continued with:

It's primarily through billions of dollars of federal bribes...very similar to Medicaid...and these folks have an issue with it. The [District] which is in our back yard has kinda jumped in both feet without a lot of discussion. And a lot of the parents came back and said look, this is moving too fast. Some of the textbooks are just not working for us, slow down and let's talk about this.

The parents continued the anti-Common Core theme with one agreeing, "Yes, that's exactly what happened," and another stating:

Why are we changing something that didn't need to be changed? Common Core is just a set of standards. If we have those standards, why are we changing? If Common Core was so great, why did our Governor have to rebrand it and name it something else?

The parent was referring to a change that had occurred at the State level. When originally adopted, the standards had been called the [State] Common Core standards. This was the name used in the District Administration's letter that I had assisted in sending home in early August. However, in September, the Governor had issued an executive order renaming the standards [the State] College and Career Ready Standards. Only the name changed; the standards themselves remained the same.

The talk-show hosts then returned to their Coalition guests with one commenting, "If you are a parent whose child is currently under this Common Core stuff," and then provides the Coalition's web address for further information and action. The other host summarized both the conversation and his view of the federal government by referencing a popular 1980's movie, "Remember what those bastards did to E.T.?"

As is typical in the radio-talk show format, the phones were opened for callers. One call was taken with the caller identifying himself as a, "Longtime listener, first time caller." The caller stated, "We have been accused of being overeducated parents who will go away from this issue eventually when we get bored and tired. My response is that we are tired of being led around by well-intentioned but undereducated elected officials." The host responded, "That's this whole town." The caller continued, "The Board is elected and they hire people and those people's jobs, they should know are at risk." The show ended with the hosts encouraging attendance at the upcoming Governing Board meeting on December 10<sup>th</sup> where this issue would be an agenda item.

Viewed through the lens of political spectacle, several developments occurred on and around the evening of November 12. A new set of leaders with their own understanding of acquiescence took the stage. Clearly not acquiescing to the Administration's goal of implementing the new math materials, the Coalition expressed their outrage at the new materials and demanded a response at the next Governing Board meeting. The District Administration and Governing Board agreed and an agenda item was placed on the Board Meeting to be held a month later on December 10<sup>th</sup>. This change represents a flip-flop of Edelman's (1988) view on acquiescence but is consistent with what was observed by Miller-Kahn and Smith (2001). Here, the leadership was acquiescing, not the public.

Just as new leaders emerged, so the casting of new enemies also emerged. The parent leaders began that casting through their allegations of an administration that is intimidating and restricting teacher autonomy, a theme picked up by the local media. The minutes themselves

recognize the new leadership and perhaps try to contain the now non-acquiescent parents to one part of the district by three times associating them with one specific high school. The minutes also reference the new math materials as being implemented at that one high school but in doing so subtly imply they were only implemented at that one school rather than district wide as was actually the case. The newspaper reported these allegations as fact even though some facts, such as the teachers having no involvement in the text selection, could have been easily verified as less than accurate. While the newly formed Coalition cast Administration as enemies for, “intimidating,” teachers, they were also willing to make threats of their own against other’s job security. These threats were made on friendly stages such as an allied radio talk show where the one Coalition member was introduced by the host as, “Our good friend.”

The allied radio media opened a new dramaturgical stage for the Coalition. The Coalition showed additional dramaturgical savviness through their use of other stages as well. In regards to the Governing Board meeting, well-attended recognition meetings only occur a few times a semester. They chose just such a meeting and thus ensured a relatively large audience, an audience of individual parents who could become future allies after hearing their message. The presence of a reporter at the meeting who published an article the next day indicates a Coalition media outreach as did the subsequent creation of an internet presence through both a standard webpage and a social media account.

Using each stage, the Coalition performed their dramatic script using language that was symbolic, concrete and both. Using one definition of symbolic language (Smith, et al., 2004), the Coalition used vague terminology that could be interpreted through multiple meanings. Through their social media, the Coalition talked about, “student excellence,” “empowerment,” “civic-mindedness,” and, “community,” all terms sufficiently vague enough to be widely appealing. However, while the Coalition, “welcomes assistance in our endeavor to support teachers and our students,” that welcome starts to become defined as, “Common core materials attempt to reduce the teacher’s impact on the learning process.” Combined with their other statements at the Governing Board and in traditional media settings, the Coalition’s, “welcome,” is not as broadly, “civic-minded,” as it initially appears but is narrowed to the segment of the community who share their anti-Common Core and anti-new math materials mindset. Further, as the Governing Board Minutes and the traditional media sources point out, at least the leadership of this community occupy math-based professions that generate affluence.

This affluence influences the Coalition’s construction of the problem and their use of symbols. While some symbolic language is vague, other symbols are aspects of the material world that give the world meaning (Edelman, 1988). In this manner, the Coalition’s specific concerns regarding the new math materials such as the think-pair-share and the lack of answers at the back of the book become symbolic of a, “gobbledygook,” curriculum. The Coalition constructs the problem that led to the new math materials and the Common Core from a perspective of success that radically differs from the Administration’s perspective of failure. The Coalition members see themselves as successful world-leaders in math-based fields. They learned math using the old traditional methods and have used their learning to successfully compete globally. This view is perhaps best symbolized by their questioning why the old materials that worked for them need to be changed. To the Coalition, the new materials are different and therefore threaten their success. Whereas the Administration sees the new materials as symbolic of their hopes for student success in a global economic competition, the Coalition symbolically sees the reform with its new materials as threatening the global economic success they have already achieved.

### Climax – A Collision of Constructions

The Governing Board met again on December 10<sup>th</sup>. A newspaper article summarized the meeting with the title, “[District] parents, students and teachers continue fight against Common Core.” The paper noted that 27 speeches were given by parents, teachers and students, some during the call-to-the audience and some in addressing the specific agenda item, “7.A. Study of the [State] College and Career Ready Standards in Mathematics and District Implementation and Curriculum.” The meeting minutes likewise noted the proliferation of speakers emphasizing their connection to one particular district high school.

Two of the speeches were given by district middle school teachers who supported the new math materials. Both teachers emphasized that the new materials better supported student skill attainment including, “deeper understanding,” better, “student engagement,” and a, “strong foundation,” that allowed students to go, “deeper into how basic operations work.” Both speakers made points regarding their appreciation for the greater, “autonomy,” the new materials afforded them and that, “good teaching adapts curriculum to meet the needs of the students in the classroom.” In the meeting minutes, these two speeches’ synopsis each had over 200 words.

In contrast, the Coalition’s speeches were each afforded a synopsis of around 60 words. But what they lacked individually they made up with numbers and the use of multiple stages. Some Coalition leaders posted their speeches on the Coalition website. A local newspaper extensively quoted others.

The allegations of Administrative threats and intimidation continued as a theme. In the month between the two Governing Board meetings, District Administration had undertaken a series of interviews with District Math Teachers to obtain their feedback regarding the new materials. A Coalition parent leader stated to the Governing Board, “I want you to know that I have personally spoken to teachers that said they felt intimidated during these recent interviews...think about this when ANY survey results are presented to you tonight.” A teacher member of the Coalition who simultaneously served on the executive board of the teachers’ association also reported that he had, “Several conversations with teachers from various sites that have reported restrictive and intimidative measures.” The Superintendent did not share the teacher interview data that evening instead stating, “That data is being compiled; the data will be useful in ascertaining options for a course of action.” The Superintendent did promise the topic of intimidation would be discussed at an upcoming principal’s meeting.

The Coalition also focused on a theme of the resources available for this new implementation, or rather, they focused on the lack of these resources. One Coalition parent noted that, “homework is difficult to accomplish when families have multiple children and have access to only one computer.” Another Coalition parent’s story was reported in the newspaper:

[The Parent] read from a hand written note from a student to a teacher. The student was concerned about not being able to complete some online quizzes. The student wrote: Hi Ms. (Anonymous), My mother turned off our wifi and cable, so I couldn’t do the quizzes at home. When I got to school I tried doing it 3 times and two of those days the [District] website was down. The day it wasn’t down the school computers weren’t loading and I waited 45 minutes for it too [sic] load. Then the bell rang and I had to leave. SORRY I was irresponsible.

The Superintendent responded to this particularly emotional appeal along with the other claims of inadequate resources. As noted in the minutes, a “skills practice book has been ordered,” “a parent resource guide is being developed,” “a written guide for students...is being developed,” and, “an additional lab at [a high school] was recently finished.” Still, the Coalition was not satisfied with

members calling for a complete replacement of the new texts as early as the start of the new semester, now only one month away.

In addition to responding to Coalition concerns, the District Administration including the Superintendent, an Assistant Superintendent, the Executive Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education and the District Math Coordinators for Elementary and Secondary Math gave prepared statements addressing the reasons for choosing the new materials, the process for doing so, and advocating for the new material's benefits. Themes similar to those in the August parent letter emerged. The board minutes state, "[the Assistant Superintendent] was invited to provide an overview of the global challenges and of the textbook adoption policies. She related how difficult it is for Board members, when faced with K-12 education policy and decision-making involving unfunded mandates from legislators." She also cited data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, and the Program for International Student Assessment showing that Common Core was needed to improve American students' mathematics achievement in relation to their international peers. The District High School Math Coordinator followed up with a study involving 17,000 students conducted by a national think-tank demonstrating the new materials had in fact raised student achievement on standardized test and would do likewise for this District.

These presentations formed District Administration's first detailed and public explanation of the process used in choosing the new materials. The explanation emphasized themes of collaboration, consensus, teacher training, and the enthusiasm teachers originally had for new materials that would meet the demands of the Common Core. The Assistant Superintendent stated that the process followed District Policy including, "The Superintendent has delegated to certified staff the responsibility of recommending textbooks to the Governing Board for adoption by the District." After reviewing the adoption timeline and the input process teachers had, she stated, "This was their responsibility and their decision."

The District Administration also made comments that foreshadowed the conflict's denouement. At the beginning of the meeting, the Superintendent shared that he and the Assistant Superintendent had, after the previous Governing Board meeting, "met with many of those parents and spent several hours meeting that resulted in productive discussions and an agreement to schedule a follow-up meeting on December 20 to continue working together to address their concerns." Indeed, right before taking the Administration to task for threatening behavior regarding the teacher interviews, a Coalition Parent also shared, "After that board meeting, those of us that spoke, met with [the Superintendent and Assistant] to address our coalition's collective concerns."

## **Denouement**

The December 10 Governing Board meeting would be the last meeting involving large numbers of angry Coalition members. Instead, the action shifted to these closed door meetings involving Coalition Parent Leaders and District Administrators. While records of these meetings are not publicly available, inferences regarding what occurred can be made from additional comments made by Coalition members at Governing Board meetings in January, February and March along with another news article that appeared in mid-January. The January 14<sup>th</sup> meeting minutes summarize Coalition call-to-the-audience comments with, "Progress is being made," as members of the Coalition have met with District Administration. Further, "the timeline is being finalized and that it meets with agreement." The timeline here refers to plans to re-open the district textbook adoption process to potentially choose another new math text that would allow each individual school to select their own text. A few days later, the local paper reported:

[The] District Associate Superintendent said the district is listening to the parents and believes the conversations are constructive. “We met with them a couple of times, have listened very closely to their concerns and ideas and, in fact, have been able to implement several of their suggestions,” she said. “I think the ongoing dialogue is really positive, and we’re working hard to have a good relationship with them.” [The Associate Superintendent] said members of the group complained that the textbooks inadequately explained how to solve problems, and that the district has addressed those concerns by sending students home with printouts of detailed instructions that were previously only available online. She also said the district is looking at students’ technology needs “with a critical eye” going forward.

The District Administration and the Coalition did move forward together. The high school math textbook adoption process was re-opened and each high school and middle school given the option to stay with the current materials or proceed with another new selection. My high school was the only school to choose change. A new committee made a new text recommendation. They chose the Coalition’s preferred text. The new text was displayed for 60 days and this time the display included a location at the high school in the Coalition leaders’ community. On June 24, the Governing Board unanimously approved the consent agenda which included item J, “Approval of Math Textbooks for Adoption.” The minutes recorded no debate or discussion.

The conflict and denouement stages continued the political spectacle theme of symbolism as each side continued to interpret words, actions and texts according to their own construction of the Common Core problem. That enemies, allies and leaders continued to be cast and recast is also apparent ranging from the Coalition’s continued allegations of administrative intimidation and the eventual alliance of District Administration and the Coalition in selecting a new text for one of the district’s 18 schools. Depending on one’s construction of the problem, the District Administration’s use of national testing data such as the PISA, NAEP, and TIMS represents either powerful proof of needed educational reform or the illusion of rationality by using quantifiable data to support a conclusion that was already pre-constructed.

The experience from December through June illustrates other elements of the political spectacle. Coalition leaders poignantly portrayed a textbook policy whose ends were disconnected from the means. District Administration tacitly admitted this reality through statements at the December Board Meeting discussing resources and support materials that were still being ordered or, in the case of a high school computer lab, were only just then being completed.

The denouement illustrated the distinction between the spectacle’s onstage and backstage action. Onstage, the Coalition and Administration actors alike sought “excellence,” and, “student achievement.” They talked about collaboration and community and consensus. Backstage, real material benefits were negotiated. Onstage, these material benefits were cast as benefitting all as all district students would have access to handouts with detailed instructions and the promise of having new technology needs met. In reality, all the students did receive the relatively inexpensive printouts and instructions. Only one school however, the high school from which the Coalition Leadership emerged, is mentioned in the public record as receiving the much more expensive new computer lab. This same school was also the sole beneficiary of a new District allocation for yet another set of expensive textbooks.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

The Governing Board acquiesced to the Coalition’s demands for a new textbook, but the acquiescence was limited to one school, the district’s largest school located in its most affluent

community. Resources that could have been spent equitably across a district that stretched from the inner-city to the suburbs were disproportionately spent on those already privileged. The mechanics of political spectacle such as the ideologically motivated use of symbols were utilized to achieve this policy end.

The Coalition gave the math text both concrete and symbolic meaning with the symbolism derived from their construction of the original problem. In their own view, the Coalition members were already successful competitors in a global world and they had achieved this through using the “old” math. The new math textbooks with their new approaches and pedagogies threatened this success and so became symbols of an unwanted and unneeded change. That there was a disconnection between means and ends as seen in the unavailability of necessary resources, such as computer lab time and internet connectivity, strengthened this symbolic interpretation.

As the textbook became symbolic of the threats to their success, so the Coalition cast school administrators who supported the change as enemies. The Coalition used their repeated claims of coercion and intimidation by administrators to cast their enemies. Edelman suggested that the use of public enemies may be even more powerful when an enemy is subtly cast. Enemies and allies were cast and recast subtly as the spectacle unfolded. Administration was initially cast as one block, a monolithic enemy. As the drama evolved, the meeting minutes carefully and repeatedly noted the protest came from one school, although the newspaper noted that were from across the district. The superintendent promised in a public meeting to address the claims of intimidation with the school principals. The associate superintendent stated the teachers chose the curriculum. Principals, including me, were literally displaced to the back of the meeting room watching as the dramatic events unfolded. District level administrators, but not site administrators, participated in the eventual closed door meetings. Whereas originally the Coalition saw all administration as enemies, in the end, the Coalition and district administration, but not site administration, worked as allies in resolving the issue.

The Coalition used multiple public stages to make their claims and attract more allies. These stages included use of public forums designed to attract more allies to their cause such as a well-attended “recognition” Governing Board meeting and easily accessible and trendy social media. The forum of social media provided a publicly accessible platform for the Coalition agenda and encouraged others to join including through their own comments and attendance at Governing Board meetings. The Coalition appeared on radio-talk show, a format pre-disposed to conservative and anti-federal government discourse, and encouraged others to attend the upcoming Governing Board meeting. However, ultimately only a select few of the parent leaders, all from the district’s most affluent area, negotiated on the “back stage” behind closed doors to achieve district acquiescence to their demands for a new text.

This case examines the experience of one district regarding one issue. Further research into the efforts of other Coalition like groups could illuminate the extent to which these groups represent genuine democratic community building, as the Coalition portrayed themselves, or are in fact spectacles designed to shift resources to already affluent constituencies. Additionally, this case study focused on the micro-level politics surrounding one district’s Common Core related efforts. However, the spectacle suggests facts are not always as they seem but rather the result of ideological constructions designed to reinforce existing inequalities. Further research into the Common Core may illuminate macro-level political spectacles.

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