

**The Colorado Coalition for Better Education:
An Interview with Don Perl—Teacher, Advocate,
& Activist for Better Education**

**by
Yvonne Siu-Runyan & Don Perl**

A renaissance man, Don Perl, President of the Coalition for Better Education (CBE.org) in Colorado, was born and raised in Binghamton, NY. His parents are first generation Jews from Southeastern and Eastern Europe

As Don says, "I graduated from college so long ago that I have had a world of experiences." Don earned his undergraduate degree in English from the University of Rochester. He then earned his Doctor of Jurisprudence degree from Syracuse University. Upon graduating with his law degree, Don worked as a trust examiner for the Comptroller of Currency. Following this five year stint, Don practiced law in upstate New York and worked in various venues for two and a half years—real estate, criminal law, domestic relations, school law, and property law. During this time, he became dismayed by the hypocrisy and the dissonance he felt while practicing law. At this turning point, Don left the law profession, and dedicated his time to writing a novel about the hypocrisy of the law and its effects on a young small town lawyer. While working on his unpublished book, Don decided he wanted to learn Spanish, and went to Mexico. While in Mexico, Don taught English to Mexican Nationals. Upon returning to the United States, he was a census taker, a bartender, a waiter, a bar manager, and a Spanish and English teacher at the Community College of Denver. He was then asked to work as Vice-President of a Community Corrections Project to re-educate ex-offenders. Don worked in the Corrections System for three years, then taught Language Arts and Spanish in the public schools of Colorado. In 2001, Don earned his Master's Degree in Spanish from The University of Northern Colorado. Currently, Don Perl teaches Spanish at The University of Northern Colorado.

In this interview Don Perl discusses his past, the reasons why he refused to give the CSAP, what followed, how we can get involved.

YSR: Don, when did you earn your teaching certificate, and why did you decide to become a public school teacher? I mean why a teaching certificate and not something else?

DP: I earned my teaching certificate in 1981 from Metro State College and my first year of teaching I worked at Englewood High School teaching English. I felt like a wandering Jew for so long and had tried other things in life. Since I had some success teaching English in Mexico, getting my teaching certificate and bringing others to learning seemed like a natural calling.

En Loco Parentis

YSR: What stuck in your mind when you were earning your teaching certificate?

DP: One of the mottos that stuck in my head was "en loco parentis." That we are in the place of parents during the school day, and that we want no harm to come to our children.

YSR: So, the motto "en loco parentis" had a huge impact on how you viewed your role as a teacher?

DP: Indeed, I took this motto to heart, and the atmosphere that I worked to create in the classroom was always as "familial" as possible. One colleague described my classroom like this, "You walk into Perl's classroom and you feel like you are sitting in front of a family fire sharing ideas."

Our Current High Stakes Regimen Harms

YSR: You have been an opponent of high-stakes testing. Is this correct? And why?

DP: Absolutely. I saw this current high-stakes testing regimen as harmful, because it promoted labeling and competition at the expense of our children's curiosities and natural tendencies to co-operate. So, I read a great deal about the history of testing, and I was driven by the realization that corporate enterprise was profiting tremendously on this scheme. Not only was this a choking hypocrisy, but an abuse of the most vulnerable in society-our children.

YSR: But, if you cared about our young so much, why didn't you just give the CSAP and be done with it instead of boycotting the test? I mean what you did took a lot of courage. Weren't you afraid?

DP: I agonized over this for a long time. I kept asking myself, "What are we as teachers really doing for our children? Aren't we to teach by example? How do we demonstrate our consciences as citizens? Must we always bury our personal beliefs to the desires of the state? I took a little survey of my colleagues and asked them if any administrator or politico had come to them and interviewed them concerning their thoughts about high stakes testing. Not one person had been asked. The professionals who know how children learn were totally left out of the equation. So, after sifting through all this, I took it upon myself to set an example of resistance for my students and colleagues.

You know, when I taught in Mexico, I learned that teaching is a political profession, that teachers, while paid miserably, had a culture of raising their voices. Teachers are greatly respected in Mexico. I felt almost deference from my students in Mexico. And part of that respect came from the teachers who raised their voices in protest against the inhumanities of government.

It was a bit of a culture shock to teach in the United States and see that here teachers are passive, and their Teachers' Unions pay only lip service to resisting NCLB and other horrible high-stakes standardized testing regimens.

Making the Decision to *NOT* Give the CSAP and the Fallout

YSR: What happened as a result of you boycotting the test and not giving the CSAP? You really put yourself on the line.

DP: The fallout was pretty surreal. Despite the wave of emotions, which vacillated between excitement and fear, I knew at some level that I was doing the right thing, and that I was at a crossroads in my life. I was suspended without pay for two weeks. The phone rang a lot and I received a lot of ugly calls (I would just hang up), and thankfully, there were wonderful calls. I also received a lot of mail, and most of the letters were supportive.

The newspaper here in Greeley called for my firing.

When I returned to the classroom after the suspension was over, I felt great stress. Some of my colleagues went out of their way to avoid me, while others were rock solid. The atmosphere was pretty charged, though, and it was obvious to me that the school administrators were upset with my not giving the CSAP. So, I knew I would have to do something else besides working for the Greeley Public Schools. Thus, I decided to make 2001 my last year in the district, after working for 19 years in the district. My letter of resignation was one sentence long: "So displeased am I at the direction public education is going, that I have decided to make this my last year."

YSR: What did you do after you turned in your resignation letter?

DP: I worked on my Master's Degree in Spanish at The University of Northern Colorado.

YSR: Why Spanish?

DP: I fell in love with the language and the people when I lived in Mexico, and a new world opened up to me—another way of thinking and another way of approaching life's journey.

The Manufactured Crisis

YSR: Why are you working so hard to get rid of the NCLB Act and high stakes testing?

DP: I had just returned to public school teaching in 2000 after a year sabbatical where I was working on my masters' degree in Spanish. My classes were composed of students of working class families; many of the households were Spanish speaking.

Teachers were ordered to give CSAP testing - all in English - to all our students. My intuition put up all kinds of objections to this regimen, and I began to read about the harms of high stakes standardized testing. One of the studies that really cemented my opinions is THE MANUFACTURED CRISIS by Berliner and Biddle. So, little by little I came to the conclusion that, for my own sanity and physical well-being, I had to refuse to give the test, and I had to go public and declare my reasons for my position.

The Coalition for Better Education (CBE)

YSR: Is this one of the reasons you came upon the idea to form the organization, Coalition for Better Education (CBE)? Did you do this all by yourself?

DP: Well, I didn't come up with this idea. I had a little booth at one of the first Greeley fiestas in August of 2003. I was distributing literature on the harms of CSAP. A friend came up to me and said, "Don, why don't you try to get this on the ballot for the 2004 election?" So, I started that journey, and during this process, a brilliant student in the teacher education program approached me about the idea of organizing aspiring teachers, creating a web site, and thus getting the movement off the ground. Of course, our first mission would be the daunting task of forwarding the ballot initiative.

YSR: When was CBE formed and how long did it take you to do this?

DP: CBE's formal debut occurred in 2004. It took three years to get this organization up and running.

YSR: How did you get others to support CBE?

DP: The ballot initiative was approved in March of 2004. That was significant. We got some press coverage, and some parents contacted me when they

heard about the initiative. "What can we do to help?" they asked. And so, through volunteers, we worked throughout the summer of 2004 getting signatures for the initiative.

The Work of CBE

YSR: What are some of the things CBE has done?

DP: In 2004, the first debut of CBE, we floated an initiative to put the elimination of CSAP on the ballot.

YSR: What kind of ballot? Local? State? Who helped and what happened?

DP: This was a state initiative since CSAP is state mandated. Of course, we didn't have \$100,000 to get the necessary signatures. We needed about 67,000 signatures. In addition, we barely had enough money to make the copies.

YSR: How did you raise money for this initiative?

DP: I had two partners on the ballot initiative-Andres Guerrero, Professor at AIMS Community College, and Chris Kauffman, a fellow teacher in Greeley. Both are wonderful people who have been willing to speak out against the injustices of high-stakes testing. They agreed to join me as official names on the ballot initiative. And the three of us came up with some money to start making copies. The costs of filing the initiative with the Secretary of State's Office are minimal. The expenses start with making copies. But, the manager of Kinko's liked our project, and gave us a wonderful discount for making copies.

YSR: And then what happened?

DP: During the campaign, a number of folks stepped forward to volunteer to get signatures. About 20 of us met at the Secretary of State's Office on August 2, 2004 to hand in the petitions. We decided to make this a media event, and so the press was there and interviewed a number of the volunteers. For some of us, it was the first time we had met face-to-face.

Before we left the Colorado Secretary of State's Office on this day, we put our heads together. We decided that we needed look into costs of advertising to inform parents of their exemption rights regarding CSAP. I found statutory law to support parental rights - CRS - 22-1-123.

As an aside, if you go to our website at <<http://www.thecbe.org>> you can read our history - something I wrote about 2 1/2 years ago.

Anyway, we did get 12,485 signatures, and some press coverage.

YSR: What else has CBE done?

DP: In the past three years, we have run advertisement campaigns to raise awareness of the harms of high-stakes standardized testing. We have advertised on bus benches in Denver and in Greeley. We picked mid-January to start our campaigns, and we did this for symbolic reasons.

We celebrate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in mid-January, and the bus benches are symbolic too of Rosa Park's historic act in December of 1955. Little by little, parents have begun to see the injustices in CSAP, and we have developed a table of presenters who have made presentations at various places around the state.

Angela Engel and Tim Babbidge have been particularly active in resisting NCLB and CSAP.

Laura Manuel has done an excellent job working our website. She has taught classes for aspiring teachers at Metro, and Tim, Angela and I have made presentations to her classes.

Carol Carminati, from Boulder has been wonderful and has made political buttons for us at no charge. She has also arranged for bumper stickers, and negotiated a very reasonable price for them. And, of course, special thanks to you, Yvonne, for organizing the dinner in October, where we honored Susan Ohanian.

This garnered some funds for both Susan's website and our campaign. I brought my little library of resistance, which included some books, videos, and music. I was going to raffle them off, but Angela stepped forward and organized an auction, and so, thanks to her we were able to raise a little more money for Susan's web site and also for CBE, and our latest bus bench and billboard campaign.

YSR: How did you spend the money raised for CBE?

DP: Currently, as you know, we are in an advertising campaign to inform parents of their rights to opt their children out from taking the CSAP.

The Importance of Informing Parents and Their Rights

YSR: Why inform parents?

DP: In the last analysis, parents have the power. They love their children, and they are the taxpayers. The schools are "charged with" serving the children, and not the other way around. Once parents realize that we are living in a "through the looking glass" world, and once we reach a critical mass, their protests will have a great deal to say about the future direction of public education.

Anyway, with this in mind, we put up a billboard on I-25 south of Pueblo. We will have another one in early January in Colorado Springs, also on I-25. In addition to these billboards on I-25 south of Pueblo, we now have 20 bus benches in the Denver area, and two billboards in Greeley.



YSR: Wow, that is great!

So, what suggestions do you have for teachers who are beaten down, discouraged, and struggling with the NCLB Act, high stakes testing, and just plain tired of all the insanity?

DP: As far as advising teachers are concerned, I struggle with this. Everyone has his or her own values, and demons to deal with.

Those of us in the teaching profession need courageous people to speak out on behalf of the children and the profession we serve. The very fabric of our society demands it. Any hopes of a nurturing world where all are deemed worthy of respect, where individual talents and differences are recognized, require teachers to lead the way.

Somewhere educators are going to have to speak up and say, "Yes, I may have a great deal to lose by voicing my opinion, but this must be said." When more teachers speak out, a wave begins, others will take courage, step forward, and positive social change will take place. During 2008, as educators we must speak out, for this is an important year for our country. ***We can choose to ignore what has happened or become involved. Our fragile democracy requires it.***

I am hopeful, but we must continue to forge ahead or nothing of substance will change what is happening to public schools across our nation. To take action is a matter, which involves courage, integrity, and persistence, and too, is a requirement for the continuance of any hopes for democracy.

—Yvonne Siu-Runyan is Professor Emerita, the University of Northern Colorado (Greeley). She can be reached at <hanalei@indra.com>.