

Rescuing Our Schools from “Tougher Standards”

A plague has been sweeping through American schools, wiping out the most innovative instruction and beating down some of the best teachers and administrators. Ironically, that plague has been unleashed in the name of *improving* schools. Invoking such terms as “tougher standards,” “accountability,” and “raising the bar,” people with little understanding of how children learn have imposed a heavy-handed, top-down, test-driven version of school reform that is lowering the quality of education in this country.

It has taken some educators and parents a while to realize that the rhetoric of “standards” is turning schools into giant test-prep centers, effectively closing off intellectual inquiry and undermining enthusiasm for learning (and teaching). It has taken even longer to realize that this is not a fact of life, like the weather – that is, a reality to be coped with -- but rather a political movement that must be opposed.

The Essence of the Tougher Standards Movement



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The Case Against “Tougher Standards”

People who talk about educational “standards” use the term in different ways. Sometimes they’re referring to guidelines for teaching, the implication being that we should change the nature of instruction – a horizontal shift, if you will. (In the case of the standards drafted by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics [NCTM] in 1989, for example, the idea was to shift away from isolated facts and memorized procedures and toward conceptual understanding and problem solving.)

By contrast, when you hear someone say that we need to “raise standards,” that represents a vertical shift, a claim that students ought to know more, do more, perform better. This can get confusing because discussions about standards sometimes are limited to only one of these meanings, sometimes flip-flop between them, and sometimes involve an implicit appeal to one in order to press for the other. Our concern here is primarily with the second category; we’re not proposing that there shouldn’t be any guidelines for what goes on in classrooms or that our current approaches shouldn’t be changed. (One look at the “bunch o’ facts” model of instruction in a traditional classroom and the need for new standards -- horizontal movement – becomes painfully clear.)

Even the idea of vertical movement seems hard to argue with, at least in the abstract. Don’t we want schools to be of high quality, and students to be able to do many things well? Of course. But the current demand for Tougher Standards carries with it a bundle of assumptions about the proper role of schools, the nature and causes of failure, and the way students learn. That’s why a number of people (mostly educators) have come to view with growing alarm what is now the dominant model of school reform.

People from parents to Presidents have begun to sound like a cranky, ill-informed radio talk-show host, with the result that almost anything can be done to students and to schools, no matter how ill-considered, as long as it is done in the name of “raising standards” or “accountability.” One is reminded of how a number of politicians, faced with the perception of high crime rates, resort to a get-tough, lock-‘em-up, law-and-order mentality. This response plays well with the public, but is based on an exaggeration of the problem, a misanalysis of its causes, and a simplistic prescription that frequently ends up doing more harm than good.

So too with demanding Tougher Standards in education. Back in 1959, John Holt wrote that the main effect “of the drive for so-called higher standards in schools is that the children are too busy to think.” Today, it is almost impossible to distinguish Democrats from Republicans on this set of issues – only those with some understanding of how children learn from those who haven’t a clue. The disagreement that plays itself out in boards of education and state legislatures is pretty much limited to a clash between, on one side, the champions of Tougher Standards (a constituency that includes virtually all corporate groups, the President and the Governors, the leadership of the American Federation of Teachers, and most reporters who write about education); and, on the other side, those on the extreme right wing whose suspicion of anything involving the federal government leads them to oppose *national* standards or testing. (They, too, tend to endorse the idea of Tougher Standards, but insist on local control.) That’s pretty much the extent of the public debate on the subject. Left out almost entirely is the point of view of the students themselves, and the impact on their learning.

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The result is that, from California to New York, from Michigan to Texas, from Virginia to Colorado, the kind of teaching that helps students understand ideas from the inside out – and that sustains their *interest* in understanding – is under siege. One story can stand in for thousands:

Not long ago, a widely respected middle-school teacher in Wisconsin, famous for helping students design their own innovative learning projects, stood up at a community meeting and announced that he “used to be” a good teacher. The auditorium fell silent at his use of the past tense. These days, he explained, he just handed out textbooks and quizzed his students on what they had memorized. The reason was very simple. He and his colleagues were increasingly being held accountable for raising test scores. The kind of wide-ranging and enthusiastic exploration of ideas that once characterized his classroom could no longer survive when the emphasis was on preparing students to take a standardized examination.

The purveyors of Tougher Standards had won, and therefore the students had lost.

Five Fatal Flaws

The Tougher Standards movement is fatally flawed in five separate ways.

- 1. It gets motivation wrong.** Most talk of standards assumes that students ought to be thinking constantly about improving their performance. This single-minded concern with results turns out to be remarkably simplistic. The assumption that achievement is all that counts overlooks a substantial body of psychological research suggesting that a focus on how well one is doing is very different from a focus on *what* one is doing. Moreover, a preoccupation with performance often undermines interest in learning, quality of learning, and a desire to be challenged.
- 2. It gets pedagogy wrong.** The Tougher Standards contingent is big on back-to-basics, and, more generally, the sort of instruction that treats kids as though they were inert objects, that prepares a concoction called “basic skills” or “core knowledge” and then tries to pour it down their throats. This is a model that might be described as outdated were it not for the fact that, frankly, there never was a time when it worked all that well. (Modern cognitive science just explains more systematically *why* it has always come up short.)
- 3. It gets evaluation wrong.** In practice, “excellence,” “higher standards,” and “raising the bar” all refer to scores on standardized tests, many of them multiple-choice, norm-referenced, and otherwise flawed. Indeed, much of the discussion about education today is arrested at the level of “Test scores are low; make them go up.” All the limits of, and problems with, such testing amount to a serious indictment of the version of school reform that relies on these tests.
- 4. It gets school reform wrong.** Proponents of Tougher Standards have a proclivity for trying to coerce improvement by specifying exactly what must be taught and learned – that is, by mandating a particular kind of education. There is good reason to doubt that the way one changes schooling is simply by demanding that teachers and students do things differently. “Accountability” usually turns out to be a code for tighter control over what happens in classrooms by people who are not in classrooms – and it has approximately the same effect on learning that a noose has on breathing.
- 5. It gets improvement wrong.** Weaving its way through all these ideas is an implicit assumption about “rigor” and “challenge” – namely, that harder is always better. The reductive

(and really rather silly) idea that tests, texts, and teachers can all be judged on the single criterion of difficulty level lurks behind complaints about “dumbing down” education and strident calls to “raise the bar.” Its first cousin is the idea that if something isn’t working very well -- say, requiring students to do homework of dubious value -- then insisting on more of the same will surely solve the problem. As Harvey Daniels puts it, the dominant philosophy of fixing schools today consists of saying, in effect, that “what we’re doing is OK, we just need to do it harder, longer, stronger, louder, meaner, and we’ll have a better country.”

Each of these five problems is discussed at greater length in a new book entitled *The Schools Our Children Deserve*. Any one of them would be enough to raise serious questions about the call for Tougher Standards. Together, they suggest a threat to education of such dimensions that the only reasonable question for conscientious educators and parents is how we can most effectively change directions.

Practical Strategies to Save Our Schools

Whenever something in the schools is amiss, it makes sense to work on two tracks at once: protect students from the worst effects in the short term and work to change or eliminate that policy in the long term. Let’s begin with some short-term responses where testing is concerned:

First, teachers should do what is necessary to prepare students for the tests -- *and then get back to the real learning*. Never forget the difference between these two objectives. Be clear about it in your own mind, and whenever possible, help others to understand that the distinction. For example, you might send a letter to parents explaining what you are doing and why. (“Before we can design rigorous and exciting experiments in class, which I hope will have the effect of helping your child learn to think like a scientist, we’re going to have to spend some time getting ready for the standardized tests being given next month. Hopefully we’ll be able to return before too long to what research suggests is a more effective kind of instruction.”) If you’re lucky, parents will call you, indignantly demanding to know why their kids aren’t able to pursue the more effective kind of instruction all the time. “Excellent question!” you’ll reply, as you hand over a sheet containing the addresses and phone numbers of the local school board, state board of education, legislators, and the governor.

Second, do no more test preparation than is absolutely necessary. Some experts have argued that a relatively short period of introducing students to the content and format of the tests is sufficient to produce scores equivalent to those obtained by students who have spent the entire year in test-prep mode.

Third, whatever time is spent on test preparation should be as creative and worthwhile as possible. Avoid traditional drilling whenever you can.

Fourth, administrators and other school officials should never brag about high (or rising) scores. To do so is not only misleading; it serves to legitimate the tests. In fact, people associated with high-scoring schools or districts have a unique opportunity to make an impact. It’s easy for critics to be dismissed with a “sour grapes” argument: You’re just opposed to standardized testing because it makes you look bad. But administrators and school board members in high-scoring areas can say, “Actually our students happen to do well on these tests, but that’s nothing to be

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proud of. We value great teaching and learning, which is precisely what suffers when people become preoccupied with scores. Please join us in phasing them out."

A group of educators in Florida recently took advantage of their school's privileged status to make a powerful statement. That state not only grades schools but then hands out money to those with the highest scores - in effect making the rich richer and the poor poorer. In a bold public protest, six teachers and their principal went to the state capital and handed back the bonuses. In North Carolina, teachers pooled their bonuses to create a foundation that would provide funds to the schools that needed it most.

Finally, whatever your position on the food chain of American education, one of your primary obligations is to *be a buffer* - to absorb as much pressure as possible from those above you without passing it on to those below. If you are a superintendent or assistant superintendent facing school board members who want to see higher test scores, the most constructive thing you can do is protect principals from these ill-conceived demands to the best of your ability (without losing your job in the process). If you are a building administrator, on the receiving end of test-related missives from the central office, your challenge is to shield teachers from this pressure - and, indeed, to help them pursue meaningful learning in their classrooms. If you are a teacher unlucky enough to work for an administrator who hasn't read this paragraph, your job is to minimize the impact on students. Try to educate those above you whenever it seems possible to do so, but cushion those below you every day. Otherwise you become part of the problem.

As important as I believe these suggestions to be, it is also critical to recognize their limits. There is only so much creativity that can be infused into preparing students for bad tests. There is only so much buffering that can be done in a high-stakes environment. These recommendations merely try to make the best of a bad thing. Ultimately we need to work to end that bad thing, to move beyond stopgap measures and take on the system itself.

Unfortunately, even some well-intentioned educators who understand the threat posed by testing never get to that point. Here are some of the justifications they offer for their inaction:

- *"Just teach well and the tests will take care of themselves."* This may be true in some subject areas, or in some states, or in some neighborhoods. But it is often a convenient delusion. Often, to prepare students for the tests in the most effective way is to teach badly - to fill them full of dates and definitions and cover a huge amount of material in a superficial fashion. Conversely, to teach in a way that helps students understand (and become enthusiastic about) ideas may actually lower their scores.
- *"This too shall pass."* Education has its fads, and standards on steroids may be one of them, but there is no guarantee that it will fade away on its own. Too much is invested by now; too many powerful interest groups are backing high-stakes testing for us to assume it will simply fall of its own weight. In any case, too many children will be sacrificed in the meantime if we don't take action to expedite its demise.
- *"My job is to teach, not to get involved in political disputes."* When seven-year-olds can't read good books because they are being drilled on what Jonathan Kozol calls "those obsessively enumerated particles of amputated skill associated with upcoming state exams," the schools have already been politicized. The only question is whether we will become involved on the other side - that is, on the side of real learning. In particular, much depends on whether those teachers, administrators, and parents who already harbor (and privately

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acknowledge) concerns about testing are willing to go public, to take a stand, to say, "This is bad for kids." To paraphrase a famous quotation, all that is necessary for the triumph of damaging educational policies is that good people keep silent.

- *"The standards and tests are here to stay; we might as well get used to them."* Here we have a sentiment diametrically opposed to "This too shall pass," yet one that paradoxically leads to the identical inaction. Real children in real classrooms suffer from this kind of defeatism, which can quickly become a self-fulfilling prophecy: assume something is inevitable and it becomes so precisely because we have decided not to challenge it. The fact of the matter is that *standardized tests are not like the weather*, something to which we must resign ourselves. They haven't always existed and they don't exist in most parts of the world. What we are facing is not a force of nature but a force of politics, and political decisions can be questioned, challenged, and ultimately reversed.

Thus the need for us to organize in order to fight the tests themselves. Some states are already organized, even to the point of having websites. Check these out -- or, if you live elsewhere, use them as models for constructing your own:

| State | Internet Site(s) |
|--------------|--|
| AZ | http://www.stopAIMSnow.org & http://www.egroups.com/group/azstandards |
| CA | http://pages.prodigy.net/bdoherty80/testing.htm & http://www.thecraftstudio.com/standards |
| FL | http://www.xfcats.com |
| GA | http://www.cpog.org |
| MA | http://www.fairtest.org/arn/masspage.html & http://www.scam-mcas.org (student-oriented) |
| MI | http://www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/meap.html |
| NC | http://www.geocities.com/nccds/index.html |
| NV | http://www.castausa.com |
| OH | http://www.stopopts.org |
| TX | http://www.taasblues.com |
| VA | http://personal.cfw.com/~dday/VASOLs.html |

Together with other educators and parents, consider taking these actions:

- Talk informally to friends and acquaintances -- at the supermarket and the hair dresser, at dinner parties and kids' birthday parties -- about these issues. Help your neighbors understand that an emphasis on Tougher Standards and test scores makes it harder for children to learn and to care about learning. Suggest that if a school official brags about the latest scores, we ought to reply, "If this is what matters to you, then I'm worried about the quality of education my child is getting here."
- Write a letter to the editor of your local paper -- or, better yet, an op-ed article. Three examples dealing with the MCAS test in Massachusetts are available: "Tougher Tests = Lower Standards," (<http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/tsls.htm>) offering a general analysis; "A Set-Up to Tell You You're Stupid," focusing on students whom the test has failed; and "Turning the Tables," (<http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/mcas.htm>) a satirical essay in the form of a test that state education officials would fail. For good measure, a sample is also

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included from the *Greensboro [N. Carolina] News & Record* titled "The Insanity of Testing Mania" (available on-line at <http://www.alfiekohn.org/standards/ncoped.htm>).

- Write to -- or visit -- your state legislators about the issue.
- Write to your U.S. Senators and Representative to ask that they support "The Fairness and Accuracy in Student Testing Act," introduced by Sen. Paul Wellstone (Minn.) and Rep. Robert Scott (Va.) in April 2000, which would prevent states or districts from using a standardized test as the primary basis for making decisions about students' graduation, promotion, or placement. It would also require that any tests that are used for those purposes "be valid and reliable for the purposes for which they are used, measure what the student was taught, provide students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency, and provide appropriate accommodations for students with limited English proficiency and disabilities."
- Attend -- and speak out at -- school board meetings and other community forums on education. If you are a parent who is concerned that too much time and attention are being focused on test preparation, make your views known to the principal and/or superintendent. (A sample letter is available on-line at <http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/letter.htm>)
- Communicate the same message to real estate brokers who sell neighborhoods on the basis of those scores. (An example of how to frame the message for this audience is available on-line at <http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/ssnts.htm>)
- Form a delegation of parents and educators and request a meeting with the top editors (and education reporters) of your local paper. Tell them, "Every time you publish a chart listing schools' standardized test scores, you unwittingly make our schools a little bit worse. Here's why..."
- Challenge politicians, corporate executives, and others who talk piously about the need to "raise the bar," impose "tougher standards," ensure "accountability," and so on to take the tests themselves -- and, perhaps, even to allow their scores to be published in the newspaper. This is especially important in the case of high-stakes exit exams, which are increasingly being used to deny diplomas to students who don't pass them, regardless of their academic records. The reality, of course, is that few adults could pass these tests. Therefore, public officials should be prepared to justify their demand that teenagers must do something that they, themselves, cannot. And if they refuse this challenge, they should be called upon to defend *that*.
- Print up bumper stickers with slogans such as STANDARDIZED TESTING IS DUMBING DOWN OUR SCHOOLS.
- For every seminar or in-service telling teachers how to meet the new state standards (or boost kids' scores on standardized tests), we should be offering three that talk about how to fight these standards and phase out these tests.
- Parents need to become actively involved -- and, fortunately, that has been happening in some states. For inspiration and practical ideas, take a look at how a grassroots parent group in Wisconsin (<http://www.alfiekohn.org/standards/wisconsin.htm>) recently managed to overturn a high-stakes testing plan. Other parent-led groups are mobilizing in Ohio, Virginia, Georgia, and other states.

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- Commission a survey and then release its results at a press conference. One group of researchers suggested including these questions:

"Do the tests improve students' motivation? Do parents understand the results? Do teachers think that the tests measure the curriculum fairly? Do administrators use the results wisely? How much money is spent on assessment and related services? How much time do teachers spend preparing students for various tests? Do the media report the data accurately and thoroughly? Our surveys suggest that many districts will be shocked to discover the degree of dissatisfaction among stakeholders." [Source: S. G. Paris, et al., "A Developmental Perspective on Standardized Achievement Testing." *Educational Researcher*, June-July 1991, p. 17]
- Work with your state coordinator ([http://www.fairtest.org/arn/A List of State Coordinators.htm](http://www.fairtest.org/arn/A_List_of_State_Coordinators.htm)) to sponsor a conference on these issues. Make sure to alert local reporters ahead of time to maximize press coverage. This can help you locate still more people in the area who are willing to become active.
- Finally, both educators and parents can simply refuse to participate in state and district testing programs. Many states have opt-out provisions (though they're not widely publicized) by which parents can request that their children be exempted from taking standardized tests. Investigate to see whether this is available where you live and, if so, do everything in your power to make that fact widely known. Some parents and students are, in effect, boycotting the tests even where opt-out provisions don't exist. In Massachusetts, a group of high-school students is organizing a statewide boycott; check out their website at www.scam-mcas.org.

Teachers, too, might think about organizing acts of civil disobedience. In Japan, as Catherine Lewis reports in her book *Educating Hearts and Minds*, "Elementary achievement is high because Japanese teachers are free from the pressure to teach to standardized tests." Until they get to high school, there are no such tests in Japan -- and the reason there are no such tests is that teachers (through their union) simply refused to administer them because of their destructive educational effects. Boycotts have also been effective in England and Australia.

Closer to home, Jim Bougas, a middle school teacher in a small town in Massachusetts, grew increasingly frustrated with how the state test was forcing instruction to become more superficial. He informed his principal in the spring of 1999 that he could not in good conscience take part in administering the test and was reassigned to the library during that period. The next year, following a denial of a similar request, he agonized about what to do. Finally, he decided that if the test was just as unfair and destructive in 2000 as it had been in 1999, his response could not be any different - even at the risk of suspension or dismissal. Besides, as he told a reporter, if the test continues, "I have no job because they've taken it away from me as long as I have to spend my time teaching to the test. I can't do that anymore. So I have nothing to lose."

Such a protest is not only inspirational to many of us but an invitation to ponder the infinitely greater impact of collective action. Imagine, for example, that a teacher at any given school in your area quietly approached each person on the staff in turn and asked: "If ___ percent of the teachers at this school pledged to boycott the next round of testing, would you join them?" (The specific percentage would depend on what seemed realistic and yet signified sufficient participation to offer some protection for those involved.) Then, if the designated number was reached, each teacher would be invited to take part in what would be a powerful act of civil

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disobedience. Press coverage would likely be substantial, and despairing-but-cowed teachers in other schools might be encouraged to follow suit.

Without question, this is a risky undertaking. Theoretically, even an entire school faculty could be fired. But the more who participate, and the more careful they are about soliciting support from parents and other members of the community beforehand, the more difficult it would be for administrators to respond harshly. (Of course, some administrators are as frustrated with the testing as teachers are.) Participants would have to be politically savvy, building alliances and offering a coherent, quotable rationale for their action. They would need to make it clear - at a press conference and in other forums - that they were taking this action not because they are unwilling to do more work or are afraid of being held accountable, but because these tests lower the quality of learning and do a serious injustice to the children in our community.

The bottom line is that standardized testing can continue only with the consent and cooperation of the educators who allow those tests to be distributed in their schools - and the parents who permit their children to take them. If we withhold that consent, if we refuse to cooperate, then the testing process grinds to a halt. That is what happened in Japan. That is what can happen in the United States if we understand the urgency of the situation. Discuss it with your university students, your staff, your colleagues, your neighbors: *What if they gave a test and nobody came?*

Have other ideas? Please send email to strategies@alfiekohn.org.

References and Resources

The "five fatal flaws" of the Tougher Standards movement are adapted from a recent book by Alfie Kohn titled *THE SCHOOLS OUR CHILDREN DESERVE: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "Tougher Standards,"* published by Houghton Mifflin. (Several recent articles have been spun off from that book, as has a separate short book called *THE CASE AGAINST STANDARDIZED TESTING: Raising the Scores, Ruining the Schools.*)

You may also be interested in:

- Two recent books on standards: *WILL STANDARDS SAVE PUBLIC EDUCATION?*, a short essay by Deborah Meier followed by comments from other thinkers, published by Beacon Press; and *ONE SIZE FITS FEW: The Folly of Educational Standards*, by Susan Ohanian, published by Heinemann.
- Other recent books about testing: Linda McNeil, *CONTRADICTIONS OF SCHOOL REFORM: Educational Costs of Standardized Testing* (Routledge, 2000); Peter Sacks, *STANDARDIZED MINDS* (Perseus, 1999); W. James Popham, *TESTING! TESTING!: What Every Parent Should Know About School Tests* (Allyn and Bacon, 2000); and Gerald Bracey, *PUT TO THE TEST: An Educator's and Consumer's Guide to Standardized Testing* (Phi Delta Kappa, 1998).
- Information from and about FairTest, the leading national organization offering a critical perspective on standardized testing. Its website, www.fairtest.org, includes an evaluation of every state's testing policy and links to a listserv called the Assessment Reform Network. A related group, the Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education (CARE), which is opposed to the new testing program in Massachusetts, recently drafted an alternative assessment proposal (<http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/aa.htm>) -- a very useful document for anyone who may be asked, "If not standardized tests, then what?"
- Audio- and videotapes of presentations by Alfie Kohn on these topics. (Information available on-line at <http://www.alfiekohn.org/miscellaneous/tapes.htm>)
- A devastating analysis, based on the high-stakes TAAS test in Texas, of how efforts to raise scores effectively undermine the quality of teaching and learning -- and how this effect is most pronounced in schools that serve poor and minority students. Go on-line for this report by Linda McNeil and Angela Valenzuela. For the most recent and comprehensive analysis of the effects of testing in Texas, go on-line be linked to a lengthy article by Walt Haney.
- Special issues of *Rethinking Schools* (Spring 1999, on-line), *Phi Delta Kappan* (November 1997 and November 1999) and *Educational Researcher* (November 1996) devoted to the issue.
- Research demonstrating that when teachers are held accountable for raising standards and test scores, they tend to become so controlling in their teaching style that the quality of students' performance actually declines: Flink et al., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 59, 1990: 916-24. Deci et al., *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 74, 1982: 852-59.

Some of the above entries have links to other Internet sites. For more information and direct links, please see <http://www.alfiekohn.org/standards/resources.htm>