Test Ban Entreaty

Interview by Melissa Minkin

Student-centered schools, not standardized tests, will reform public education, says Alfie Kohn.

*A**LFIE KOHN HAS SPENT** most of his life making trouble in school. In fifth grade, he aptly titled a class assignment "Busywork" and handed it to his teacher. He led his fellow sixth graders in protest by refusing to sing military songs in music class. And when the local American Legion chapter recognized him with an award in ninth grade, his "short, uninvited speech" refusing the honor triggered his first flurry of national publicity.*

Today Kohn, who has degrees from Brown and the University of Chicago, delivers more than forty speeches a year to parents, teachers, administrators, and businesspeople. He is one of the most vocal critics of school reforms that call for high-stakes tests, greater accountability, and tougher standards—changes, he says, that sound appealing on bumper stickers but undermine public education. Kohn is relentless in his drive to slay the Goliath of the "Tougher Standards" movement, a trend Congress quickened with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandating annual testing.

A Kohn speech decodes the mystery of standardized testing: how it kills intellectual curiosity, beats down innovative teachers, and sets up large groups of students to fail. His books challenge the value of competition, the wisdom of traditional discipline, the use of rewards and punishment to control people, even the nature of altruism and empathy (he says we're more caring than we think). Recent titles include The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "Tougher Standards," *and the forthcoming* What Does It Mean To Be Well-Educated? *and* Unconditional Parenting.

MELISSA MINKIN: How do you think the movement toward "tougher standards" and school accountability is actually lowering the quality of education in this country?

ALFIE KOHN: The desperate rush to raise standards in schools was not initiated by educators or for educational reasons. Rather, it was mandated by politicians and corporate executives for political reasons.... The effect is to squeeze the intellectual life out of classrooms. Also, it has a disproportionately destructive effect on poor and minority kids, and it drives out some of our best teachers. Schools begin to look like test preparation factories.

MM: So what do standardized tests measure?

AK: Standardized tests are extremely good measures of the size of the houses near a school. Study after study has found that you can predict as much as 90 percent of the differences in test scores without knowing a damn thing about what's going on in the classrooms. All you have to know is the poverty level, other measures of socioeconomic status, or whether students have crammed forgettable facts and isolated skills into short-term memory. They don't measure deep thinking; they don't measure the ability to apply and connect disparate ideas; they don't measure irony or creativity or decency.

MM: Are you saying that test results don't matter?

AK: Test scores are not merely meaningless; the news is actually worse than that. Higher test scores generally are bad news. That's true both at the individual level—because research shows that high test scores are correlated with superficial thinking on the part of many students—and at the aggregate level, because if a school boasts that its test scores went up, parents ought to immediately respond by asking what had to be sacrificed from their kids' education in order to make that happen.

Little kids are being denied the chance to have recess; art and music programs are being slashed. There are fewer discussions of current events, fewer field trips, fewer opportunities to read good books of the children's choosing, fewer high school electives, fewer opportunities to do discovery-oriented science and interdisciplinary projects. The best is being sacrificed to raise test scores, and the news media uncritically report [high] test scores as good news.

MM: Many parents believe high-stakes testing doesn't affect them—their children are in private schools, or affluent public schools that don't test, or if they do, their kids score well. Why should these parents care about the testing trend? Why should people without school-age children care?

AK: First, short-term self-interest. All public schools, including affluent schools, are being tested, and those with the best educational programs have more to lose. Some incredibly fine curriculum units—along with the talented and frustrated teachers who created them—are indeed being lost in these schools as a result of the pressure to raise scores. Even many private schools, exempt from state testing at the moment, are feeling the effects of this whole counterproductive "raise the bar" sensibility.

Second, long-term self-interest. We all have to live alongside the graduates of, and dropouts from, our public schools. Ultimately, our whole social fabric is affected by what is done to other people's children. Despite the best efforts of powerful people like George W. Bush to sell us on privatization, education really is a public good, like it or not.

Finally, simple human decency. If we're screwing over the most vulnerable members of our society—children, no less—then no one with a conscience can be indifferent.

MM: Do accountability and testing have a role in the classroom?

AK: First, we have to distinguish between a way to tell whether your child is learning or needs extra help on the one hand, and finding a way to evaluate whole schools or districts on the other. For example, if I want to know how my kid is doing, I turn to the teacher who has been, ideally, offering specific tasks that provide constant feedback about the level of my child's knowledge and understanding. If my child comes home babbling excitedly about something she figured out in school today, or if the kids in a class continue to argue animatedly about an idea after class is over, these are very good signs. You don't need standardized tests or grades to tell you what kids understand and where they need more support.

If we are talking, though, about accountability at a schoolwide level, then it is possible to sample the projects and portfolios of students to get an overall sense of the quality of teaching and learning that is going on in that school. No knowledgeable educator would ever argue that you need a standardized test to hold schools accountable or to assess the quality of learning.

MM: Many schools are implementing scripted learning programs. How do they fit in?

AK: I wouldn't dignify them by calling them learning programs. They were not designed to help kids make connections and distinctions. They were not designed to help kids become proficient thinkers, critical thinkers, and lovers of learning. They were designed to raise scores on bad tests.

Research, dating back decades, demonstrates that such scripted direct instruction is useless in reaching any ambitious [cognitive development] goals. At best, they get kids to cough out answers on command for a short period of time. [And these programs] drive the best teachers out of the profession. Some of these programs have almost Orwellian names like "Success For All." Rarely do affluent white kids have to deal with them. Which is to say, the least ambitious and most appalling kinds of instruction are visited almost uniformly on African-American and Latino kids in cities.

MM: Where is this testing trend heading?

AK: A lot of us thought we had hit bottom a few years ago, because of how testing has come to take over education systems. Then Bush and his cronies pushed through something even worse than our wildest nightmares, which is a federal requirement that every state test every student every year, from grades three through eight and again in high school. It was passed with the approval of most Democrats in Congress, reminding us once again that the relevant distinction is not between Democrat and Republican, but between people who have some understanding of how learning happens and those who haven't a clue.

Half the states now either have or are phasing in a high-stakes graduation test in defiance of common sense and the accepted standards of education measurement, which hold that it is unethical to make decisions about whether students get diplomas or are promoted to the next grade on the basis of a single test score. [As a result,] hundreds of thousands of students will be forced out of school—despite years of academic accomplishments—because they're not good at taking standardized tests.

A disproportionate share of those students will be low-income and minority students. We've already watched it happening in places that have pioneered this heavy-handed, top-down, test-oriented approach, like Texas—which is an educational nightmare. We're seeing the effects now in Massachusetts and New York City and elsewhere.

For some years, there have been encouraging signs of a bottom-up rebellion in which teachers, students, and parents have organized meetings in their living rooms, set up local Web sites, planned petitions, rallies, marches, boycotts. In California, North Carolina, and Florida, teachers who were awarded bonuses for high test scores—which is to say, bonuses for working in affluent districts—either publicly refused to accept the money or...put it into a fund for schools that really need help. One of the strongest reactions [from parents has been] to refuse to allow their kids to participate in the testing. Though it has happened in some rich and some poor schools, the rich schools get all the attention when it happens.

[A superintendent living near Rochester, New York] created a committee to devise and implement a county diploma that would be awarded to students on the basis of multiple measures of academic performance instead of solely on the basis of passing that state's Regent's test. The idea was to devise a diploma that would be legally valid, practically useful, and educationally credible so that the power of the state government to require standardized testing as the criterion for graduation would be effectively neutralized. Instead of just boycotting the test, they said, 'Let's make that state diploma unnecessary.'

There is certainly a need to send letters to the editor. But some folks think we need to do more than that: we need to talk about civil disobedience. More ordinary parents, along with teachers, are becoming fed up with the whole corporate approach to school reform. Unfortunately, very few top policymakers understand why "the tougher standards movement" has the practical effect of lowering standards in school.

In fact, my rule of thumb is: the closer you get to real classrooms, the more people understand what a menace it is to talk about standardizing education and testing kids constantly. I can tell from the applause when I speak to groups of teachers, as opposed to groups of principals, as opposed to groups of superintendents, as opposed to groups of policymakers. The farther you get from real kids, the more likely you are to think that standardized testing is a fine idea.

MM: If you were choosing a school for your children, what would you look for?

AK: The best schools are those that take kids seriously—their needs and concerns, their questions, and interests. The lessons are organized around problems and projects that speak to what kids want to know about themselves and the world around them, rather than forgettable facts and isolated skills and discrete disciplines. Kids still acquire knowledge, but in a context and for a purpose. Great classrooms are inviting places, filled with stuff, with discrete activity centers, with stuff by the kids all over the walls, with lots of evidence that kids are learning with and from one another. You don't tend to see desks in a row, or get the sense that the teacher makes all the decisions unilaterally. There's a kind of friendly, productive disorder. There's a sense that this place is a caring community; it's not about competition (who's better than whom) or about isolation (eyes on your own work). And the kids play an active role with the teacher in making decisions, planning events, solving problems together. In short, it's a place that feels warm and collaborative, that invites kids to take risks and think deeply together about things that matter. ▲

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