

# Bad Signs (#)

## Bad Signs By Alfie Kohn

You can tell quite a lot about what goes on in a classroom or a school even if you visit after everyone has gone home. Just by looking at the walls – or, more precisely, what’s on the walls – it’s possible to get a feel for the educational priorities, the attitudes about children, even the assumptions about human nature of the people in charge. A chart that I created some time ago called “What to Look For in a Classroom” listed some Good Signs along with Possible Reasons to Worry. Among the latter: walls that are mostly bare, giving the building a stark, institutional feel; and posted displays that suggest either a focus on control (lists of rules or, even worse, punishments) or an emphasis on relative performance (charts that include grades or other evaluations of each student).

Because I’ve already done so elsewhere, I won’t take time here to explain why such lists and charts make me shudder. Instead, I’d like to consider a few signs and posters that are generally regarded as innocuous or even inspiring. Particularly deserving of a closer look are two specific posters as well as a broader category that includes a seemingly unlimited number of examples. **“NO WHINING”**: This sign – which sometimes consists of the word “whining” with a diagonal red slash through it – is meant to send a message to students, and that message seems to be: “I don’t want to hear your complaints about anything that you’re being made to do (or prevented from doing).” To be sure, this is not an unusual sentiment; in fact, it may be exactly what your boss would like to say to you. But that doesn’t mean it’s admirable to insist, perhaps with a bit of a smirk, that students should just do whatever they’re told, regardless of whether it’s reasonable or how it makes them feel. If we might respond with frustration or resentment to receiving such a message, why would we treat students that way? “No whining” mostly underscores the fact that the person saying this has more power than the people to whom it’s said.

Of course, the sign could be read more literally: Perhaps it’s just a certain style of complaining, a wheedling tone, that’s being targeted. Frankly, I don’t love that sound either, but should someone’s tone of voice really take precedence over the content of whatever he or she is trying to say to us? I’m less annoyed by whining than I am by the disproportionate reaction to it on the part of adults. It’s fine to offer an occasional, matter-of-fact reminder to a child that people tend to be put off by certain ways of asking for something, but our priority should be to make sure that kids know we’re listening, that our relationship with them doesn’t depend on the way they talk to us. Besides, young children in particular need to have some way of expressing their frustration. We don’t let them hit, scream, or curse. Now we’re insisting that they can’t even use a tone of voice that’s, well, insistent?

Regardless of how “whining” is defined, going to the trouble of posting a sign about it suggests that our own convenience is what matters most to us (since it’s obviously easier for anyone in a position of authority if those being ordered to do something comply without question). It also implies that we’re unwilling to reconsider our own actions and uninterested in having students question authority – despite the fact that education at its best consists of helping them to do precisely that.

**“ONLY POSITIVE ATTITUDES ALLOWED BEYOND THIS POINT”**: I’ve seen this poster on classroom doors in a public school in Minnesota, a Catholic school in Indiana, and a quasi-progressive Friends school in Massachusetts. Each time I came across it, I found myself imagining how its message might be rewarded for satirical purposes. Once I came up with “Have a Nice Day . . . Or Else.” Another time I fantasized about secretly removing the poster at night and replacing it with one that reads “My Mental Health Is So Precarious That All of You Had Better Pretend You’re Happy.”

I’ve long been convinced that dark stuff sometimes lurks just behind those huge, brittle smiles and voices that swoop into unnaturally high registers in front of little children. Even apart from the treacherous style in which it’s often delivered, the compulsive tendency to praise kids when they do something helpful may reflect the pessimistic assumption that the action was a fluke: Children must be marinated in “Good job!”s whenever they happen to do something nice; otherwise they’d never act that way again. The more compulsive (and squeaky) the use of positive reinforcement, the bleaker the underlying view of children – or maybe of our species.

But back to the sign. Putting students on notice that their attitudes had better damn well be positive tells us less about what makes for an optimal learning environment than it does about the needs (if not neediness) of the person who sends this message. Kids don’t require a classroom that’s relentlessly upbeat; they require a place where they’ll feel safe to express whatever they’re feeling, even if at the moment that happens to be sad or angry or scared. They need a place, in other words, where negativity is allowed. Bad feelings don’t vanish in an environment of mandatory cheer – they just get swept under the rug where people end up tripping over them, so to speak.[1] What you or I may describe as a negative attitude, meanwhile, may be an entirely appropriate response to an unfair rule, an intimidating climate, or a task that seems pointless or impossible. To exclude such responses from students is to refuse to think seriously about what may have given rise to their negativity (see “No Whining,” above).

**INSPIRATIONAL POSTERS**: Far more common than any specific message, including the two I’ve mentioned here, is a whole class of posters that might be described as “inspirational.” Taped up in elementary, middle, and high schools across the country – outside the main office, in the cafeteria and the library, on individual classroom walls – we find these earnest, interchangeable calls to greatness, typically superimposed on gorgeous fading photographs. “You can if you think you can!” “Reach for the stars!” “Achievement is within your grasp!” “Winners make the effort!” “This year I choose success!” And on and on.

At this point I should probably confess that I don’t much care for posters on school walls, period. It may seem like a harmless way to cover up painted cement blocks, but there’s something impersonal and generic about items that weren’t created by, or even for, the particular individuals who spend time in this building. Show me a school that adorns its walls with posters created by distant corporations, and I’ll show you a school where it’s possible the same could be said of its curriculum.

But if commercial posters in general don’t gladden the heart of a visitor, there’s something uniquely off-putting about these posters, which show up in all sorts of workplaces, not just schools. And it seems I’m not alone in this reaction, judging by the popularity of a series of parodies marketed under the name “Demotivators.” One of these posters features a dramatic image of the pyramids along with the caption: “ACHIEVEMENT – You can do anything you set your mind to when you have vision, determination, and an endless supply of expendable labor.” Another depicts a packet of fast-food French fries; it says: “POTENTIAL – Not everyone gets to be an astronaut when they grow up.” On a third poster, a leaping salmon is about to wind up in the jaws of a bear: “AMBITION – The journey of a thousand miles sometimes ends very, very badly.”

Let’s not just satirize, though; let’s analyze. The exhortatory slogans found on motivational posters, like those in motivational speeches and books, tend to offer a combination of strenuous uplift and an emphasis on self-sufficiency. They tell us that, individually, we can do anything if we just set our minds to it. The trouble with this sort of encouragement becomes clearer when we begin to think about some of the specific things that students may conclude they can do.

Here’s the first problem: The assurance that you can achieve anything you desire through hard work stretches the truth beyond recognition. And it’s in the neighborhoods where children are most likely to hear about the wondrous results that await anyone with perseverance and a dream that the claim is hardest to defend.

“You can be the valedictorian!” With certain goals, the news is even worse. It’s not just that being the valedictorian is an unrealistic expectation for most students; it’s that this status, like so much else in our schools and our society, is set up as a zero-sum game. If I become the valedictorian, then you can’t – and vice versa. In a competitive environment, our dreams are mutually exclusive. This fact the posters somehow neglect to mention.

“You can get into Harvard!” And what happens when I, like 93.95 percent of the other self-selected and mostly superqualified applicants, receive my rejection letter from Cambridge? What if I chose success and reached for the stars and stayed true to my goals – only to wind up with nothing? Some students will become angry, concluding, not unreasonably, that they have been lied to. But others will blame themselves. And that’s the problem number two: “The flip side of positivity is a harsh insistence on personal responsibility,” as Barbara Ehrenreich observed in her book *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*. If you fail, “it must [be] because you didn’t try hard enough, didn’t believe firmly enough in the inevitability of your success.”

And who benefits when the have-nots are led to think that way? Suffice it to say that nothing maintains the current arrangement of power more effectively than an approach that ignores the current arrangement of power. Rather than being invited to consider the existence of structural barriers and pronounced disparities in resources and opportunities, we’re fed the line that there are no limits to what each of us can accomplish on our own if we just buckle down.

Notice, too, that inspirational posters are almost always generic, the implication being that “success” or “achievement,” per se, is desirable; it doesn’t matter what exactly one wants to achieve or at what one is trying to succeed. Any dream will do. But is that a conviction we’re really prepared to endorse? And again, as they say in Latin, cui bono? Whose interests are served when we look at things that way?

“You can get an A!” For example, what if success is defined in terms of high grades, as is the case in traditional schools? The available research suggests that there are three predictable effects when students are led to focus on bringing home better report cards: They tend to become less interested in the learning itself, to think in a more superficial fashion, and to prefer the easiest possible task.

But who is going to bother rethinking the value of rating students with letters or numbers – or the value of the specific tasks involved, like memorizing facts for a test or filling out worksheets, that determine who gets which grades – if the goal is just “success,” and that’s equated with getting an A? Do we want to send the message that this objective is no less meaningful than, say, coming up with a novel solution to a meaningful intellectual challenge? Or that making a million dollars is just as worthy as working for a more just society?[2]

When motivational posters fail to make the relevant distinctions among dreams (or kinds of “achievement”), when we fail to encourage critical thought about these issues, the dominant goals and values of our culture are accepted by default. Is hard work always a good thing? Who gets to decide on the nature and purpose of that work? These are precisely the kinds of questions you’re less inclined to ask if you’ve been told “Your attitude determines your future.” The message of the self-help movement has always been: Adjust yourself to conditions as you find them because those conditions are immutable; all you can do is decide on the spirit in which to approach them (hint: we recommend a can-do spirit). To do well is to fit in, and to fit in is to perpetuate the structures into which you are being fit.

Am I being too hard on, or expecting too much from, a simple poster? Well, precisely because they’re so pervasive – and accepted so uncritically – I think it’s worth digging into the hidden premises of their chirpy banalities. Just because something is generally regarded as uncontroversial doesn’t mean it’s value-neutral. Imagine if a very different sort of poster appeared in your local high school – one that said, for example: “Some children are born into poverty; others are born with trust funds” – and picture what the accompanying illustration might look like. Or suppose we put up a sign that featured this remark by the late George Carlin: “It’s called the American dream because you have to be asleep to believe in it.” Undoubtedly some people would complain that these sentiments were too controversial. But where is the outrage over the subliminal values of a poster that airily assures us, “The sky’s the limit!”?

One measure of the ideological uses to which inspirational slogans are put is the fact that they seem to be employed with particular intensity in the schools of low-income children of color. Here the self-empowerment agenda serves as more than background décor, and Jonathan Kozol has incisively pointed out the political implications of making African-American students chant, “Yes, I can! I know I can!” or “If it is to be, it’s up to me.” Such slogans are very popular with conservative white people, he notes, because “if it’s up to ‘them,’ the message seems to be, ‘it isn’t up to us,’ which appears to sweep the deck of many pressing and potentially disruptive and expensive obligations we may otherwise believe our nation needs to contemplate.” He adds: “Auto-hypnotic slogans” such as “I’m smart! I know that I’m smart” are rarely heard in suburban schools where “the potential of most children is assumed.”[3]

I’d love to see a research study that counted the number of motivational posters (along with other self-help, positive-thinking materials and activities) in a school and then assessed certain other features of that school. My hypothesis: The popularity of inspirational slogans will be correlated with a lower probability that students are invited to play a meaningful role in decision-making, as well as less evidence of an emphasis on critical thinking threaded through the curriculum and a less welcoming attitude toward questioning authority. I’d also predict that the schools decorated with these posters are more likely to be run by administrators who brag about the school’s success by conventional indicators and are less inclined to call those criteria into question or challenge troubling mandates handed down from above (such as zero-tolerance discipline policies or pressures to raise test scores).

**GOOD SIGNS**: It would seem unsporting, and perhaps unduly negative, to conclude this little essay without suggesting what might replace all of those mass-produced exhortations to stop whining, remain (or pretend to be) upbeat, and remember to triumph over adversity. Perhaps we can begin with phrases that seem suitable for posting to someone with a more progressive sensibility. All else being close to equal, I’d be thrilled to send my children to a school whose walls featured variations on the timeless reminder to “Question authority.” And imagine if the principal’s office contained a framed print-out of this reminder from researcher Linda McNeil: “Measurable outcomes may be the least significant results of learning.” Visitors would be reassured that such an administrator understood a lot more about education than do most politicians.

Similarly, what could be more refreshing than the large sign tacked up in a Washington state classroom that said “Think for yourself; the teacher might be wrong”? Or, for those who prefer a more ironic tone, consider this commentary on control (of children by adults, or of educators by policy makers) that I spotted in an Idaho classroom: “The beatings will continue until morale improves.”

I’d also be happy to wander the halls of a middle school where every student has a sign on his or her locker that says “[Name of student] is currently reading,” accompanied by a photocopy of the cover of the book in question. Beyond the specific information being conveyed, compare the cumulative impact of hundreds of such announcements with those well-meaning but insipid reminders (“Read!”) that appear in libraries. In fact, I like to see school walls filled with all sorts of information about, and personal mementos of, the people who spend their days there. (And that includes the adults: When Deborah Meier was its principal, the central corridor of the Mission Hill School in Boston filled a large bulletin board with childhood photos of the school’s teachers.)

When I visit traditional classrooms, grimacing at so much of what’s on the walls, I find myself wondering why they’re not filled with stuff done by the students. The answer to that question, unfortunately, may be that the students haven’t been allowed to do much that’s worth displaying. Hence my original hypothesis, that the room décor may speak volumes about the theory and practice of instruction. I once spent time in a Long Island elementary school classroom where elaborate animal habitats were being created, and students had posted lists of “problems we faced when designing and constructing” these habitats. The displays gave evidence of complex thought, perseverance in overcoming those problems, classwide cooperation – and the fact that the teacher’s priority was to help these kids learn to think like scientists rather than just memorizing science facts for a test.

The broader moral is that the best classrooms, regardless of age level or academic discipline, often feature signs, exhibits, or other materials obviously created by the students themselves. And that includes students’ ideas for how to create a sense of community and learn together most effectively – as opposed to a list of rules imposed by the teacher (or summarized on a commercial poster). We’re ultimately led to ask a meta-question: not just “What should go on the walls?” but “Who decides what goes on the walls?” I’d be willing to bet that just about all of the signs and posters about which I’ve been raising concerns here were put up by the adults without even consulting the students. (What kid would suggest “No Whining?”) In fact, the exclusion of the people we’re there to teach may be the most significant, though invisible, implication of what usually goes on the walls. To reverse this, we’d need not only to rethink what we’re posting but whether the school where these items are displayed invites students to participate in thinking about what they do as well as the look of the place where they do it.

### NOTES

1. Deborah Meier once commented that if a child claims one of her classmates doesn’t like her, “We need to resist reassuring her that it’s not true and getting the classmate to confirm it; then we must ask ourselves what has led to this cry for help, and our refusal to admit it may simply lead the child to hide her hurt more deeply. Do we do too much reassuring – ‘It doesn’t hurt.’ ‘It’ll be okay’ – and not enough exploring, joining with the child’s queries, fears, thoughts?” (“For Safety’s Sake,” *Educational Horizons* 83, 1 [2004]: 59).
2. On the effects of grades, see my books *The Schools Our Children Deserve* (Houghton Mifflin, 1999) or *Punished by Rewards* (Houghton Mifflin, 1993/2018), or this article. On the poorer psychological and social outcomes for people for whom being rich (or famous or attractive) is a priority, see Tim Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism* (MIT Press, 2003). I summarized some of the research described in that book in an article called “In Pursuit of Affluence, at a High Price,” *New York Times*, February 2, 1999.
3. Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (Crown, 2005), pp. 35-36.

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