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Education's Different Drummer

Alfie Kohn Is Marching Against Standardized Learning, and He Has Gained a Nationwide Following

By Jay Mathews
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One day in 1967, a sweet-faced, bespectacled fifth-grader at Leroy D. Fienberg Elementary School in Miami Beach was given a class assignment. No one remembers what it was about, which is sort of the point. The student, Alfie Kohn, neatly headed his paper with his name, the date and an appropriate title: "Busywork."

His teacher did not like that, but that did not seem to bother young Kohn. His life since has been a series of clashes with educational authorities, making him today the most energetic and charismatic figure standing in the way of a major federal effort to make standardized curriculums and tests a fact of life in every U.S. public school.

Outside educational circles, Kohn's name is not yet a recognizable commodity. He has written eight books -- thick with footnotes -- and gives at least 50 speeches a year, but they concern matters like intrinsic motivation and constructivist learning that do not excite many television producers looking for celebrity talking heads.

Kohn and his many allies cite research showing that children who learn because teachers stimulate their natural curiosity tend to retain and understand more than those who learn to get good grades or high test scores. Adding on more tests, they say, will only encourage more bad teaching.

Many teachers and parents who encounter Kohn and his thoughts come away transfixed, ready to change their schools and join the anti-testing organizations for 38 states and the District listed on his Web site, www.alfiekohn.org.

The Web site's largest headline directs visitors to Kohn's manifesto against the campaign for tougher educational standards, now led by the incoming Bush administration and many education-conscious Democrats. "A plague has been sweeping through American schools, wiping out the most innovative instruction and beating down some of the best teachers and administrators," he says.

Kohn, 43, is a one-man show, writing his books and doing his own bookings from a beige two-story Colonial in the Boston suburb of Belmont, Mass. He lives there with his physician wife, Alisa, and their two children, Abigail, 5, and Asa, 1.

One measure of his popularity and influence is the virulent reaction to him from leaders of the standards movement. "I regard his ideology as a form of education nihilism that rejects the very notion of student achievement measured objectively," said Mark Christie, a member of the Virginia Board of Education.

Chester E. Finn Jr., a former Reagan administration education expert who is now president of the Washington-based Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, called Kohn "a seducer of the credulous and a menace to everyone who believes that our schools need to become more effective at imparting skills and knowledge to young Americans, especially the neediest among them."

But many influential educators say they find Kohn edifying. Gary Galluzzo, executive vice president of the Arlington-based National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, complimented Kohn on his "very consistent message" on the dangers of single-subject classes, rote memorization and standardized testing. "His writings and his speeches resonate with parents in ways I believe many underestimate," Galluzzo said.

Professionally, Kohn is difficult to define. He has been a researcher, a teacher, a journalist and even a stand-up comic and satiric songwriter. As an undergraduate at Brown, he created his own interdisciplinary major, which he dubbed normativism, and wrote a lengthy thesis on the idea of value judgment. As a graduate student at the University of Chicago, he did another interdisciplinary thesis on humor.

The way he learns, he said, is to "start with the question and then draw from whatever fields are useful in exploring it, rather than being confined to the methods and topics of a particular discipline." It is the "progressive education" approach to learning formulated by John Dewey, the early 20th-century educational philosopher who is one of Kohn's heroes.

He is sharp with those who dismiss Dewey as an impractical dreamer. Kohn said in his 1999 book, "Schools Our Children Deserve," that he reviewed "scores of studies demonstrating that traditional forms of instruction are as unproductive as they are unappealing, and showing that progressive education is actually more rigorous than back to basics, contrary to the way traditionalists have portrayed it as a fad."

Kohn taught a summer course on existentialism at the private school Andover from 1979 to 1985. He said he lovingly polished the lectures and reading list each year, "as one might tinker with a new car in the garage before proudly bringing it out." But the deeper he got into research on learning and the more he watched good teachers, the more he realized he was denying his students the powerfully motivating joy of exploring topics and uncovering truths on their own.

"I was treating the students as interchangeable receptacles -- rows of wide-open bird beaks waiting for worms," he said.

As a freelance writer in the 1980s specializing in psychology, he plunged into the subject of competition, producing his 1986 book, "No Contest: The Case Against Competition." That led in 1993 to his best-selling book "Punished by Rewards," an exhaustively researched assault on all forms of extrinsic motivation, from gold stars to letter grades to corporate incentive plans.

So far, "Punished by Rewards" has sold 120,000 copies, and Kohn has become a much-sought-after speaker at education conferences and teacher training seminars. He is lively and funny. Lois Bridges, his editor at the Portsmouth, N.H.-based publisher Heinemann, calls his speaking style "John Dewey reincarnated as Robin Williams."

In just the next three months, he is scheduled to speak in San Diego; Tucson; Marlborough,

Mass.; Bloomington, Minn.; Edmonton, Alberta; Ontario, Calif.; Bismarck, N.D.; Grand Rapids, Mich.; Salisbury, Md.; Hartford, Conn.; Providence, R.I.; and San Francisco.

Nonetheless, President-elect Bush and such leading Democrats as Kohn's home-state senator John F. Kerry are forging an alliance to increase the amount of standardized testing across the country and reorganize schools that don't improve. Even some educators attracted to Kohn's vision wonder whether the rewards-conscious, test-ridden American culture can really change, and whether there will ever be enough teachers with the talent to direct self-motivated learners rather than just give lectures and tests.

Kohn encourages doubters by telling them that "this is not a package deal. You don't have to do it all in order to make some changes that you find compelling and positive. Ride my train as far as you can and get off when you have to.

"I am not a utopian," he said. "I am as aware as anyone of the difficulties of creating schools that are genuinely about learning and about meeting children's needs, but that causes me to redouble my efforts rather than throw up my hands."

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