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Emphasis on testing leads to sacrifices in other areas

By Alfie Kohn

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USA TODAY
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Even as teachers ready their lesson plans for the new school year, they are keeping a wary eye on Washington, D.C. A congressional conference committee next month is expected to hammer out a version of President Bush's plan to require standardized testing for students at every grade level (from third through eighth) in every state.

Heated debate continues about whether these exams really are accurate indicators of children's capabilities and whether students ought to be flunked or prevented from graduating on the basis of a single score. Less attention has been paid to an equally important question: Given that time and energy are limited, what is being sacrificed when schools are forced to focus on test results?

The answers are increasingly clear — and disturbing — as evidence accumulates from across the USA:

- Science and social studies have been severely trimmed in states that do not include those subjects on standardized tests. For example, according to two Texas researchers, Linda McNeil at Rice University and Angela Valenzuela at the University of Texas, "Many science teachers in schools with poor and minority children are required by their principals to suspend the teaching of science for weeks, and in some cases for months, in order to devote science class time to drill and practice" on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. (Higher test scores are then widely cited as evidence of school improvement.)
- Despite the nearly unanimous view of experts that play is critical to development, recess has been cut back as a result of testing pressures. In Atlanta, where recess was simply eliminated, at least one new school was built without a playground. A recent survey of 225 Massachusetts school districts found that many schools have cut physical education programs in half, with some offering only 30 minutes per week. Parents in Virginia Beach and Palm Beach County, Fla., have resorted to petition drives to bring back

recess.

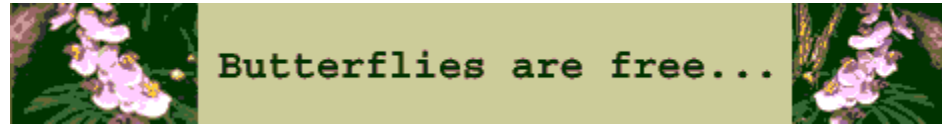
- "The arts and music have all but disappeared from many schools" in Washington, reports *The Seattle Times*, a vanishing act observed from coast to coast.
- Because most tests focus on isolated language skills — or, at best, analysis of short fragments of text — many children are finding less opportunity to read real books. One New York City teacher, compelled to use a heavily scripted program called "Success for All," was asked whether she was still allowing her students to read books of their own choosing. Declining to give her name for fear of being fired, she replied: "We haven't been doing any reading since we started preparing the kids for the reading test."
- Community service, character education, democratic class meetings and other programs to help children become good people as well as good learners have been sharply reduced. One primary-grade teacher in Milwaukee told that city's school board in June that frequent testing of her students means they can no longer contribute to a Thanksgiving dinner for homeless people or prepare games for cancer patients at a children's hospital.
- Extended activities in which students solve complicated problems, apply skills to real-life situations or design projects covering many subject areas are increasingly in short supply. Among the lessons eliminated in the name of "raising standards": a Boston school's in-depth unit in which each class studied one country, culminating in a schoolwide international fair; and a medical mentorship program that paired New Rochelle, N.Y., teens with doctors.
- There are fewer opportunities to learn outside the classroom. All field trips in Ravenswood City, Calif., elementary schools were suspended until after the spring testing cycle.

The list goes on. From high-quality high school electives to focused discussions of current events (such as last November's historic election), some of the richest learning opportunities are being squeezed out. And all this is before the enactment of a new federal requirement for even more testing.

From atop Mount Olympus, where no children live, it may seem reasonable to demand "tougher standards" and to recite slogans such as "accountability." But in real schools, things look quite different. We need to think carefully about the tradeoffs the current school-reform movement entails.

Indeed, the evidence suggests that higher scores in a given school or community may actually be cause for concern. Reports of rising test performance should lead us to ask, "What was taken away from my children's education in order to make them better at taking standardized tests?"

Alfie Kohn's eight books include The Schools Our Children Deserve. He lives in Belmont, Mass.



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