

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.

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

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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

Even parents and educators who are troubled by the Tougher Standards movement are sometimes reluctant to act on their convictions. Some hesitate to introduce politics into the schools. The truth, however, is that when seven-year-olds are being drilled on isolated skills and forced to spend precious class time learning how to take multiple-choice tests, the schools have already been politicized. The only question is whether we’ll get involved on the other side – that is, on the side of meaningful learning.

Some people complain bitterly about the fill-in-the-bubble testing, the carrot-and-stick manipulation that goes by the name of “high stakes,” the kind of teaching that amounts to a transmission of low-level skills, and all the rest of it – but they don’t speak out because they assume nothing can be done. That’s why it’s so important to realize that the Tougher Standards movement is not a force of nature but a force of politics. *For every article or seminar 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, too, 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 recently managed to overturn a high-stakes testing plan, and how a similar group in Virginia is challenging that state’s standards and testing scheme.

Parents and educators -- working individually or as part of our network of state and local organizations -- might consider the following actions:

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- 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 to parents that if they hear a school official bragging about the latest scores, they might 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. Two examples are available, both having been published in the *Boston Globe*: a straightforward opinion piece titled "Tougher Tests = Lower Standards," and a satirical essay in the form of a test that state education officials would fail.
- Write to -- or visit -- your state legislators about the issue.
- Attend -- and speak out at -- school board meetings and other community forums on education.
- 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..."
- Communicate the same message to real estate brokers who sell neighborhoods on the basis of those scores.
- Print up bumper stickers with slogans such as STANDARDIZED TESTING IS DUMBING DOWN OUR SCHOOLS.
- 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 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. Some parents in Michigan and Colorado have kept their kids home from school on testing days to protest this use of school time. 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. Obviously, substantial planning has to be done before taking such action -- both to ensure substantial participation (the larger the numbers, the better the protection from adverse consequences) and to articulate a clear rationale for the action. A mass action by teachers would have to make it clear that the opposition to standardized testing is not motivated by a fear of being held accountable but rather by a principled conviction that such testing is bad for all our kids.

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 new book by Alfie Kohn titled *THE SCHOOLS OUR CHILDREN DESERVE: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "Tougher Standards,"* just published by Houghton Mifflin. (Several recent articles have been spun off from that book as well.)

You may also be interested in:

- An audiotape of Alfie Kohn's March 7 session at the annual conference of the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (at which this organizing effort was launched) - available through ASCD - 800-933-2723.
- A new book, just published by Heinemann: *ONE SIZE FITS FEW: The Folly of Educational Standards*, by Susan Ohanian, our Vermont coordinator.
- Special issues of *Rethinking Schools* (Spring 1999), *Phi Delta Kappan* (November 1997) and *Educational Researcher* (November 1996) devoted to the issue.
- 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 -- a very useful document for anyone who may be asked, "If not standardized tests, then what?"
- Linda Darling-Hammond's book *The Right to Learn* (Jossey-Bass, 1997), a useful source of background materials.
- 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.