Beware of the Standards, Not Just the Tests (***)
Beware of the Standards, Not Just the Tests

By Alfie Kohn

A number of prominent educators are finally raising their voices against standards—particularly multiple-choice, norm-referenced tests; particularly tests with "high stakes" (read: bribes and threats) attached; and particularly at the national level. A number of federal mandates to force every state to test every student in grades 3-8 every year. Yet even as this much-needed step is being taken, the education community is still in the last stage of the 20th century, what I call the "instructivist" stage. The instructivist stage, which is still in the last stage of the 20th century, is characterized by a focus on teaching to the standards, despite the fact that it is still in the last stage of the 20th century.

The Learning First Alliance, a coalition of leading education groups, cautiously raised concerns about the tests not long ago, but mostly only for fear that the burgeoning grassroots opposition might bring down the state standards. Too bad, one of the 2001 edition of the Council of Exceptional Children lists such worries as "overhead and for the future." And to make matters worse, the council itself lists "the Smiths Recover the Standards," from The New York Times, as "the Smiths Recover the Standards." "Will Classrooms Survive the Standards?" or "Standards: From Capitalization to Resistance."

A list of boat-rocking books on the subject begins and pretty much ends with Susan Ohanian's One Size Fits Few and Deborah Meier's All Standards Saved Public Education! Alarms have been raised by Alan slice and Seth Eichenwald, among others. And from the field, the so-called "free market" research centers have closed ranks around the idea that it is permissible to criticize the tests, but not the standards. Indeed, test opponents are sternly reminded to avoid confusing the two, as though they were in fact unrelated. I want to argue not only that they are inextricably connected to one another, but also that the tests have become an emblem of everything that went wrong with the standards movement as a whole.

When the standards and tests fit together perfectly to create an airtight system of top-down, uniform, "bunch o' facts" schooling—which is what we have in many schools today—well, that's when we're really in trouble. Standards-as-mandates also imply a rather insulting view of educators—namely, that they are in fact, just because it makes sense to explain to a waiter exactly how I'd like my burger cooked doesn't mean it's better to declare that students will study the perimeter of a triangle and area of a trapezoid in the same rather cardboardy, mindless fashion. He's more likely to ask the customer what he hopes to get out of it, to make suggestions that might change what is on the menu, or to listen at all to the customer's instructions. In reality, just because it makes sense to explain to a waiter exactly how I'd like my burger cooked doesn't mean it's better to declare that students will study the perimeter of a triangle and area of a trapezoid in the same rather cardboardy, mindless fashion. He's more likely to ask the customer what he hopes to get out of it, to make suggestions that might change what is on the menu, or to listen at all to the customer's instructions. In reality, just because it makes sense to explain to a waiter exactly how I'd like my burger cooked doesn't mean it's better to declare that students will study the perimeter of a triangle and area of a trapezoid in the same rather cardboardy, mindless fashion.

Once again, the problem is not just with the construction of the tests, but with the uniformity of the standards. It is the state standards, not the tests, that are the primary problem. High-stakes testing has provided an impetus for many states to engage in a major reform movement, but reform movement has not been accompanied by any corresponding gains in education. In fact, the test-score gains that have been achieved in some states have been accompanied by a decline in educational quality. Indeed, the test-score gains that have been achieved in some states have been accompanied by a decline in educational quality.

The latter sort of standards, supported by practical guidance, can help students reason carefully, communicate clearly, and get a kick out of doing so. But long lists of facts and skills that teachers are supposed to cover in a fixed amount of time are not the way to achieve these goals. Teachers who think outside the box, who encourage students to pursue their own interests, are often labeled as "un standardized." Teachers who think outside the box, who encourage students to pursue their own interests, are often labeled as "un standardized.

Considerable research has demonstrated the importance of making sure students are actively involved in designing their own learning, invited to play a role in formulating questions, engaging in projects, and so on. But the mass standardization of students (even in a few schools) is a serious problem. This problem is not just a matter of the number of students who are not being challenged, but also a matter of the quality of what is being taught. What is the point of making students learn the perimeter of a triangle if they have no idea what it means, or why it is important, or how it can be used in real-world problems? The point of making students learn the perimeter of a triangle if they have no idea what it means, or why it is important, or how it can be used in real-world problems.

The tests arguably constitute the most serious and immediate threat to good teaching, such that freeing educators and students from their yoke should be our top priority. But we need to be careful not to lose sight of the fact that the standards are also a major problem. It is the state standards, not the tests, that are the primary problem. High-stakes testing has provided an impetus for many states to engage in a major reform movement, but reform movement has not been accompanied by any corresponding gains in education. In fact, the test-score gains that have been achieved in some states have been accompanied by a decline in educational quality. Indeed, the test-score gains that have been achieved in some states have been accompanied by a decline in educational quality.

In fairness, there are many reasons policymakers may feel compelled to impose detailed guidelines. One of the most obvious is that many of the current standards movement is just the latest episode in a long, sorry history of trying to create a teacher-proof curriculum. Alternatively, it may simply be that some specificity is always preferable. In reality, just because it makes sense to explain to a waiter exactly how I'd like my burger cooked doesn't mean it's better to declare that students will study the perimeter of a triangle and area of a trapezoid in the same rather cardboardy, mindless fashion.

Keep that in mind. But don't put too much stock in the idea that it is to offer broad guidelines for helping students learn to think like mathematicians. The latter sort of standards, supported by practical guidance, can help students reason carefully, communicate clearly, and get a kick out of doing so. But long lists of facts and skills that teachers are supposed to cover in a fixed amount of time are not the way to achieve these goals. Teachers who think outside the box, who encourage students to pursue their own interests, are often labeled as "un standardized." Teachers who think outside the box, who encourage students to pursue their own interests, are often labeled as "un standardized.

Let the record show that we are not talking about a "bunch o' facts" approach to education. Of course, that kind of teaching is also driven by an imperative to prepare students for tests, but not to an imperious to conform to specific standards. People since personally believe that to teach well is to work one's way through a list of what someone decided every nth grade ought to know. But the question is not just what you or I or the American public school system should be doing, but who one particular group of people should be allowing to do. The education has been ensnared in state standards documents and has become the law of the land. It is the state standards, not the tests, that are the primary problem. High-stakes testing has provided an impetus for many states to engage in a major reform movement, but reform movement has not been accompanied by any corresponding gains in education. In fact, the test-score gains that have been achieved in some states have been accompanied by a decline in educational quality.

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