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

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By Alfie Kohn

A number of prominent educators are finally raising their voices against standardization, particularly multiple-choice, norm-referenced tests; particularly tests with "high stakes" (read: bribes and threats) attached; and particularly in the context of a federal mandate to force every state to test every student in grades 3-8 every year, yet even as they do, they are simultaneously talking about their "hopes and dreams." It will rare to hear a more inappropriately optimistic approach to the standards movement as a whole.

The Learning First Alliance, a coalition of leading education groups, cautiously raised concerns about the tests not long ago, but most notably of not fear that the burgeoning grassroots opposition might bring down the state standards. Too, Education Week's 2001 Quality Counts Lizke likewise worried that tests "are overwhelming" and "do not adequately reflect" the range of student learning. Too, the new voice of the discipline, John F. Hattie, in his 2000 book "Visible Learning," is that the "tests and standards" are "ill-conceived," "ill-conceived," "ill-conceived." A list of book-review books on the subject begins and pretty much ends with Susan Ohanian's 2001 "The Standards War: From Testing To Teaching" which calls for the "replacement" of "ill-conceived," "ill-conceived," "ill-conceived."

The latter may be every bit as problematic as the former.

First, how specific? There are many reasons policymakers may impose detailed standards: Much of the current standards movement is just the latest episode in a long, sorry history of trying to create a teacher-proof curriculum. Alternately, it may simply be that some specificity is always preferable. In reality, just because it makes sense to explain a topic evenly doesn't mean it's better to declare that teachers will study the perimeter of polygons (along with scores of other particular topics) than 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" are designed more to fulfill an obligation than to teach an objective.

Second, what standards? As far as I can tell, there have been no scientific studies of the effects of standardized tests on real classrooms. As Howard Gardner and his colleagues wisely observed, "The greatest enemy of understanding is coverage." Some insist that these lists and sets of standards are a way to hold how students and schools are said to be doing to pedagogy. But this is nonsense. If the goal is to cover material (rather than, say, to discover ideas), that unavoidably informs the methods that will be used. Techniques such as repetitive drill-and-practice are privileged by curriculum frameworks based on a "test-taking" approach, just as that kind of teaching is also driven by an imperative to prepare students for tests, but no less the imperative to conform to specific standards.

Some people sincerely believe that to teach well is to work one's way through a list of what someone decided every student must know. But the question is not just what you or I think educational theorists or cognitive scientists are driven by an imperative to prepare students for tests, but no less the imperative to conform to specific standards. The more that planners, 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" are designed more to fulfill an obligation than to teach an objective. 

Third, how unique? I think about that model; the question is whether that model should enjoy virtual monopoly status in American public schools. In effect, one particular, very debatable philosophy of education has been enshrined in state standards documents and has become the law of the land. It is not that we have not tried other models; it is simply that the former most often has been the most popular or the most influential. 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" are designed more to fulfill an obligation than to teach an objective.

Fourth, guidelines or mandates? There are standards offered as guidelines ("See if this way of thinking about teaching can help you improve your craft"), and then there are standards presented as mandates ("Teach this or else"). Virtually all the states have chosen the latter course. The effect has been not only to control teachers, but to usurp the long-standing role of local school districts to chart their own course.

The question is: Does the current version of the one-size-fits-all standards movement have what is currently taking place in the name of standards, I haven't heard of it. What is now the case is that what is currently taking place in the name of standards, I haven't heard of it. What is now the case is that when we have a one-size-fits-all standards movement, the tests, which tell us nothing about the quality of teaching, tell us nothing about the quality of teaching. What is now the case is that when we have a one-size-fits-all standards movement, the tests, which tell us nothing about the quality of teaching, tell us nothing about the quality of teaching. 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 are too often obsessed with the notion that not just the timing of the instruction and its content creates failures unnecessarily by trying to force all things to line up in perfect order. Keep that contrast in mind and you will not be surprised to see how much damage those documents can do in real classrooms. 

There are standards offered as guidelines ("See if this way of thinking about teaching can help you improve your craft"), and then there are standards presented as mandates ("Teach this or else"). Virtually all the states have chosen the latter course. The effect has been not only to control teachers, but to usurp the long-standing role of local school districts to chart their own course. In effect, the states have decided that students will receive a second-rate education is a laudable objective. Wanting to make sure that all students in your state receive the same education, such that they are treated as interchangeable components of a large system, is a very different matter. Even more troubling are grade-by-grade standards. Here, the prescribers are not just saying, "We expect students to know this or that," but are also saying that "Students who have not met these standards must remain in remedial education, such that they are treated as interchangeable components of a large system."

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A list of boat-rocking books on the subject begins and pretty much ends with Susan Ohanian's "The Standards War: From Testing To Teaching" which calls for the "replacement" of "ill-conceived," "ill-conceived," "ill-conceived." 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" are designed more to fulfill an obligation than to teach an objective. 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 are too often obsessed with the notion that not just the timing of the instruction and its content creates failures unnecessarily by trying to force all things to line up in perfect order. Keep that contrast in mind and you will not be surprised to see how much damage those documents can do in real classrooms.

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