

# **Reflections on the School Librarians' "Standards for the 21st-Century Learner"**

## The Challenge – and an Invitation: Brief Reflections on the School Librarians’ “Standards for the 21st-Century Learner”

By Alfie Kohn

In her 1965 novel *Up the Down Staircase*, whose continued relevance is frankly rather unsettling, Bel Kaufman gave us, among other memorable characters, a school librarian so protective of her collection, so determined to make sure that books weren’t lost or mistreated, that she did everything possible to keep students away from the shelves. One can imagine what a standards document might have looked like had this librarian written it.

Still, the American Association of School Librarians’ “Standards for the 21st-Century Learner” is filled, as such documents usually are, with objectives that are mostly unobjectionable – and, I might add, that would have been just as applicable in the 20th century. Who, after all, would oppose the idea of “organizing knowledge so it’s useful”? Who’s going to deny the value of effective communication or emotional resilience?

The challenge, I think, is to read carefully in search of something that has some bite to it – and then invite AASL members to stand behind that position, to see it through to its logical conclusion even if some folks become uncomfortable. Real change happens only when we’re willing to be controversial.

Thus, for example, I was delighted to read in the introduction that “Students must gain not only the skills but the disposition to use those skills.” That sounds like boilerplate language, but the fact is that much of our education system is still mired in behaviorism and its disproportionate focus on teaching (and measuring) skills. Lots of people know how to read but don’t – which means that more, or even better, skills instruction won’t help.

What’s more, reading incentives – whether from commercial programs like Pizza Hut’s *Book It!* and Accelerated Reader or home-grown programs that dangle all manner of goodies in front of children – actually tend to *reduce* children’s interest in books by getting them to see reading as just a means to an end. (Scores of studies have found that the more you reward people for doing something, the more they lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward.)

Likewise, the statement “Reading goes beyond decoding” is hard to dispute, but taking it seriously would up-end the Reading First initiative and other aspects of the current phonics fetish that causes children to see “reading” as the acquisition of a series of decontextualized school-based skills. The same goes for standardized tests, which focus on – and thereby demand teachers pay disproportionate attention to – those piecemeal skills rather than real literacy.

To fight for what matters requires us to fight against what gets in the way. So will AASL take a public stand against reading incentives, narrow reading-instruction curricula, and testing? Will its members fight against these things on a daily basis?

One last mischievous thought: Shouldn’t documents like this one be created *with* students rather than just *for* them? If our goals for children include helping them to be thoughtful decision-makers with democratic skills (and dispositions!), then perhaps they should be part of the process of developing future standards rather than having adults decide unilaterally how we want them to turn out.

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