

Competition vs. Excellence

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By Alfie Kohn

Even before we examine each provision of President Bush's new proposal to make our educational system more competitive, we should challenge the premise of his plan. The trouble with our schools is that they are already much too competitive.

The very word "competitiveness," lately a favorite of educators, economists, and politicians, suggests a fundamental confusion between excellence, on the one hand, and the desperate quest to beat people, on the other. These two concepts are not only distinct in theory but often antithetical in practice.

Excellence is in short supply in our nation's schools – not only because so many children are graduated without basic skills but, more important, because they are not encouraged to think critically or to exercise their natural intellectual curiosity. By contrast, there is no shortage of competitiveness: The American infatuation with being Number One already suffuses our classrooms, as it does our workplaces and playing fields and families.

Mr. Bush's plan offers a pointed lesson in the consequences of blurring this distinction. It reminds us that there is a trade-off between learning and winning – and perhaps between education for the benefit of the student and education for the benefit of business.

The latter emphasis in both cases tends to produce a worshipful regard for test scores, especially of the standardized variety. These numbers, as all educators know in their hearts, fail to capture most of what is meaningful about learning; instead, they encourage nonsensical comparisons between one school and another or between this year and last. Worse, educators are pressured to "teach to the tests," foregoing potentially innovative lessons in order to make sure their students fill in the right bubbles with their number two pencils.

The President's plan not only makes these tests more salient than they already are but encourages districts to compete against each other for higher scores. Anyone who wanted to destroy what is left of rich, creative teaching – or children's love of learning – could not have devised a more effective plan.

This is not the place to ponder whether the goal of producing an adequately skilled labor force in order to raise corporate profitability can be reconciled with the goal of getting children to become thoughtful readers and lifelong learners. But even to the extent we are concerned about catering to the requirements of corporations, we should review recent surveys of managers in which their top complaint about employees is that so few know how to work effectively with others.

Indeed, where would they have learned that skill? In most American classrooms, students are forced to work against each other, competing for gold stars, grades, and recognition. The central lesson that all competition teaches is that everyone else is a potential obstacle to one's own success. Instead of more competitiveness, we need to emphasize cooperation, which research and experience suggest is far more likely to produce real excellence. The President apparently is unaware of perhaps the most exciting development in American education over the last decade, which is known as cooperative learning. When students are encouraged to work in pairs or small groups to help each other to learn, they feel better about themselves, like each other more, and develop more sophisticated cognitive strategies that result in higher achievement.

In a comprehensive review of 245 classroom studies that found a significant achievement difference between cooperative and competitive environments, David Johnson and Roger Johnson of the University of Minnesota reported that 87 percent of the time the advantage went to the cooperative approach. That result concerns bottom-line learning and doesn't even include the enhanced ability to get along with other people.

In visiting classrooms where cooperative learning is used, I like to ask students to describe the experience in their own words. One ten-year-old boy thought a moment and replied, "It's like you have four brains." By contrast, a competitor's single brain often shuts off when given no reason to learn except to triumph over his or her classmates.

Most schools, however, have another description for children who help each other to learn: They're called cheaters. Clearly, our educational system needs to make room for cooperative excellence, in which students must depend on and be accountable to each other in order to succeed. Rather than helping schools to move in that direction, though, our "education president" offers us more of the very win/lose framework that has left our economic system – and, more to the point, our educational system – in deep trouble.

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