

Confusing Harder With Better

By Alfie Kohn

Never underestimate the power of a catchy slogan and a false dichotomy. When a politician pronounces himself a supporter of “law and order” or “a strong defense,” you may protest that it’s not that simple, but even as you start to explain why, you’ve already been dismissed as soft on crime or unwilling to defend Our Way of Life.

People who attend to nuance have long been at a disadvantage in politics, where spin is out of control. Never before, however, has the same been quite so true of the public conversation about education, which is distinguished today by simplistic demands for “accountability” and “raising the bar.” Not only public officials but business groups and many journalists have played a role in reducing the available options to two: Either you’re in favor of higher standards or you are presumably content with lower standards. Choose one.

These days 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. As a result, we are facing a situation in this country that can be described without exaggeration as an educational emergency: The intellectual life is being squeezed out of classrooms, schools are being turned into giant test-prep centers, and many students — as well as some of our finest educators — are being forced out.

Part of the problem is that the enterprise of raising standards in practice means little more than raising the scores on standardized tests, many of which are norm-referenced, multiple-choice, and otherwise flawed. The more schools commit themselves to improving performance on these tests, the more that meaningful opportunities to learn are sacrificed. Thus, high scores are often a sign of lowered standards — a paradox rarely appreciated by those who make, or report on, education policy.

Compounding the problem is a reliance on the sort of instruction that treats children as passive receptacles into which knowledge or skills are poured. “Back to basics” education—a misnomer, really, because most American schools never left it—might be described as outdated except for the fact that there never was a time when it worked all that well. Modern cognitive science just explains more systematically why this approach has always come up short. When you watch students slogging through textbooks, memorizing lists, being lectured at, and working on isolated skills, you begin to realize that nothing bears a greater responsibility for undermining educational excellence than the continued dominance of traditional instruction. Shrill calls for “accountability” usually just produce an accelerated version of the same thing.

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Underlying the kind of pedagogy and assessment associated with the tougher-standards movement is an assumption that has rarely been identified and analyzed — namely, that the main thing wrong

with the schools today is that kids get off too easy. Texts and tests and teaching have been “dumbed down,” it is alleged. At the heart of metaphors like raising standards (or the bar) is the premise that harder is better.

Now, the first and most obvious thing to be said in response is that assignments and exams can be too difficult just as they can be too easy. If the latter can leave students insufficiently challenged, the former can make them feel stupid, which, in turn, can lead them to feel alienated, to lose interest in the subject matter, and sometimes to misbehave. (It’s usually less threatening for kids to be seen as incorrigible than as inadequate.) Anyone can ask students questions that are laughably easy or impossibly difficult. “The trick,” observed Jerome Bruner, “is to find the medium questions that can be answered and that take you somewhere.” In short, maximum difficulty isn’t the same as optimal difficulty.

But let’s delve a little deeper. Maybe the issue isn’t whether harder is always better so much as why we focus so much attention on the whole question of difficulty.

John Dewey reminded us that the value of what students do “resides in its connection with a stimulation of greater thoughtfulness, not in the greater strain it imposes.” If you were making a list of what counts in education — that is, the criteria to use in judging whether students would benefit from what they were doing — the task’s difficulty level would be only one factor among many, and almost certainly not the most important. To judge schools by how demanding they are is rather like judging an opera on the basis of how many notes it contains that are hard for singers to hit. In other words, it leaves out most of what matters.

Here’s what follows from this recognition: If homework assignments or exams consist of factual-recall questions, it really doesn’t make all that much difference whether there are 25 tough questions or 10 easy ones. Similarly, a textbook does not become a more appropriate teaching tool just because it is intended for a higher grade level. Some parents indignantly complain that their kids are bored and can complete the worksheets without breaking a sweat. They ought to be complaining about the fact that the teacher is relying on worksheets at all. Likewise, some teachers disdain any colleague who spoon-feeds information, insisting (often with a tone of self-congratulation) that in their classrooms, students have to work! But the latter may not be any better than the former, and the two together constitute a false dichotomy. We have to look at the whole method of instruction, the underlying theory of learning, rather than just quibbling about how hard the assignment is or how much the students must strain.

One reason a back-to-basics curriculum fits perfectly with the philosophy of prizing hard work is that it creates hard work — often unnecessarily. It’s more difficult to learn to read if the task is to decode a string of phonemes than if it is to make sense of interesting stories. It’s more exhausting to memorize a list of scientific vocabulary words than it is to learn scientific concepts by devising your own experiment. If kids are going to be forced to learn facts without context, and skills without meaning, it’s certainly handy to have an ideology that values difficulty for its own sake. To be sure, learning often requires sustained attention and effort. But there’s a vital difference between that which is rigorous and that which is merely onerous.

Other words are similarly slippery. Do we want students to be “challenged” more, or to live up to “higher expectations” in a school that stands for “excellence”? It all depends on how these words are being defined. If they signify a deeper, richer, more engaging curriculum in which students play an active role in integrating ideas and pursuing controversial questions, then you can count on my support. But if these terms are used to justify memorizing more state capitals, or getting a student to bring up her grades (a process that research has shown often undermines the quality of learning), then it’s not so clear that rigor and challenge and all the rest of it are worth supporting.

If these distinctions are missed by some parents and teachers, they are systematically ignored by the purveyors of tougher standards. Recently, my own state introduced a test that students will soon have to pass in order to receive a high school diploma. It requires them to acquire a staggering number of facts, which allowed policymakers to claim proudly that they had raised the bar. After new proficiency exams were failed by a significant proportion of students in several other states, education officials there responded by making the tests even harder the following year. The commissioner of education for Colorado offered some insight into the sensibility underlying such decisions: "Unless you get bad results," he declared, "it is highly doubtful you have done anything useful with your tests. Low scores have become synonymous with good tests." Such is the logic on which the tougher-standards movement has been built.

But how many adults could pass these exams? How many high school teachers possess the requisite stock of information outside their own subjects? How many college professors, for that matter, or business executives, or state legislators could confidently write an essay about Mayan agricultural practices or divergent plate boundaries? We would do well to adopt (Deborah) Meier's Mandate: No student should be expected to meet an academic requirement that a cross section of successful adults in the community cannot.

(In the same spirit, I propose Kohn's Corollary to Meier's Mandate: All persons given to pious rhetoric about the need to "raise standards" and produce "world-class academic performance for the 21st century" not only should be required to take these exams themselves but must agree to have their scores published in the newspaper.)

Beyond the issue of how many of us could meet these standards is an equally provocative question: How many of us need to know this stuff — not just on the basis of job requirements but as a reflection of what it means to be well-educated? Do these facts and skills reflect what we honor, what matters to us about schooling and human life? Often, the standards being rammed into our children's classrooms are not merely unreasonable but irrelevant. It is the kinds of things students are being forced to learn, and the approach to learning itself, that don't ring true. The tests that result — for students and sometimes for teachers — are not just ridiculously difficult but simply ridiculous.

"It is not enough to be busy," Henry David Thoreau once remarked. "The question is, what are we busy about?" If our students are memorizing more forgettable facts than ever before, if they are spending their hours being drilled on what will help them ace a standardized test, then we may indeed have raised the bar — and more's the pity. In that case, school may be harder, but it sure as hell isn't any better.

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