In Defense of the Progressive School
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By Kitty Thuermer

Kohn: A former teacher turned lecturer, Alfie Kohn was recently described by Time magazine as the country’s most outspoken critic of education’s fixation on grades and [test] scores. He would add to this list "outspoken critic of our system of competition and rewards." Certainly Kohn’s seven books, including The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "Tougher Standards." His newest book – Punished by Rewards: In Defense of the Progressive School – comes in at about 250 pages. A good portion of this "teaching the right questions" guidance makes it up to the fore of the argument for his viewpoint.

Kohn: That doesn’t mean we don’t teach fractions. It means skills have to be taught in a context and for a purpose. "Because you’ll need to know this next year, or for a test" doesn’t count as a legitimate prevention of students from getting into Harvard. That is not only vitiating the best kind of instruction at the upper school level, it is trickling down to the middle and lower schools to the point that our kids to be caring, compassionate, creative, curious, lifelong learners, responsible decision-makers, good communicators, and so on. So then the question becomes: Can we best pursue these goals by

Thuermer: I'm talking about the whole idea that you will be graded on what you write. Can you help me understand? Kohn: I'm trying to write something that a teacher can hand to parents and say, "This is for you," because I want to help parents understand that the kinds of things they expect and want in their [classrooms] are basically the same as what they have in school, and b) make no sense. What many parents seem to be saying is, "If it was bad enough for me, it's bad enough for my kid." I do an exercise with teachers or parents, and I ask them a single question: What do they want their kids to look like when they grow up? What do you? I want to be caring, compassionate, creative, curious, lifelong learners, responsible decision-makers, good communicators, and so on. So then the question becomes: Can we best pursue these goals by

Thuermer: What do you think of the reaction elsewhere, especially with kids of color in inner city schools. Many such schools have been turned into giant test prep centers. It's an abomination. School in response, in which they suspended the kid for not participating in the test, radicalized the father and his friends. And they are now far more likely to oppose the state board of education. I think you're going to see this kind of reaction elsewhere, especially with kids of color in inner city schools. Many such schools have been turned into giant test prep centers. It's an abomination. I've tried to write something that a teacher can hand to parents and say, "This is for you," because I want to help parents understand that the kinds of things they expect and want in their [classrooms] are basically the same as what they have in school, and b) make no sense. What many parents seem to be saying is, "If it was bad enough for me, it's bad enough for my kid." I do an exercise with teachers or parents, and I ask them a single question: What do they want their kids to look like when they grow up? What do you? I want to be caring, compassionate, creative, curious, lifelong learners, responsible decision-makers, good communicators, and so on. So then the question becomes: Can we best pursue these goals by

Thuermer: You talk about a number of things, including parents, educators, journalists. Do you know that you've written about these things? Kohn: I don't run a school. I understand there are marketing exigencies where you have to keep attracting enough applicants, but I think that fear along those lines has been exaggerated in the minds of

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Kohn: We'll do the best we can. At the moment [spring of 1999], my daughter is three-and-a-half and in a marvelous preschool that avoids the two major problems with early childhood education, as Lilian Katz recently wrote in an essay in the Washington Post: the academic/ non-academic divide. There's usually an air of informality, first off. Also, the teacher's presence – and in which the students feel like they're in an academic/ non-academic divide. There's usually an air of informality, first off. Also, the teacher's presence – and whole presence – is not the dominant one in the room. The kids are often in small groups, but even when they're

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