

# **In Defense of the Progressive School**

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An Interview with Alfie Kohn  
By Kitty Thuermer

A former teacher turned author and lecturer, Alfie Kohn was recently described by *Timemagazine* as "perhaps the country's most outspoken critic of education's fixation on grades [and] test scores." We would add to this list "outspoken critic of our system of competition and rewards." Certainly Kohn's seven books, including *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (1986) and *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's Praise, and Other Bribes* (1993), have helped to shape the thinking of parents and educators nationwide.

His newest book – *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "Tougher Standards"* – challenges the conventional wisdom of the movement toward "tough" educational standards while offering a more progressive model for excellence in education.

Kohn has appeared on more than two hundred television and radio programs, including the "Today" show and two appearances on "Oprah." A frequent keynote at national education conferences, he also speaks at universities and to school faculties and parents' groups on a regular basis.

For a man who once tried his hand as a stand-up comedian, Kohn has taken his role as agent provocateur of the educational community quite seriously. And we are the richer for it. Wrote one reviewer, "Of the dozens of 'experts' on what's wrong (and right) in U.S. schools, only a handful are truly worth reading; Kohn has long been one of the soundest. His willingness not simply to challenge conventional answers but also examine whether we're asking the right questions gives his work a genuinely eye-opening quality."

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**Thuermer:** Given your ardent belief that schools should not foster competitiveness, I was wondering about your youth. Did you escape competition as a boy? Did you engage in sports?

**Kohn:** I grew up in Miami Beach, Florida, a very odd place, where the median age was deceased. I went to a large public high school, which was an intellectual wasteland. I didn't do sports. I had elements of competitiveness to be sure – in punning, for example. But in high school I was a nationally ranked debater. And although I was winning and liking it, it took me years to unlearn the poisonous messages I was taught: that any argument can be successfully defended if you're clever enough. And that winning is what counts most. I still describe myself today as a recovering debater. Sports carries with it its own set of problems, but competition is not limited to that. So when people say we need academic awards, debates, science competitions, and national spelling bees, what I hear them saying is, "Well, we destroy the athletes by turning their lives into an attempt to defeat everyone in sight – why shouldn't we do that to everyone else, too?"

**Thuermer:** What did you see yourself doing or being when you grew up?

**Kohn:** When I graduated from college, I assumed I would become a college professor. Both my degrees were interdisciplinary. Out of that experience developed an enduring commitment to interdisciplinary scholarship, where you start with the question, or problem, and draw from whatever field is useful for exploring it. At the age of twenty-two, I awarded myself a sabbatical and decided to go into teaching. I taught at a small independent school in Pennsylvania ... and have never gone back to the academy.

**Thuermer:** How do you feel about the rash of hate crimes and violence in our schools?

**Kohn:** Hate is not new. But in Littleton, for example, there was a combination of individual psychopathology and ready access to guns. We can't just focus on the dramatic headlines of school shootings and gay bashing to determine the scope of the problem and then hammer out some sort of improvised solution. Even if no kid ever picked up a gun, we have a problem in American high schools because kids suffer day-to-day in quiet ways. They are alienated, they are frustrated, they are disconnected, and they are, to a large extent, unengaged intellectually.

Independent schools share some problems with the enormous public school factories. First off, there is an emphasis on competition. Every time you set up such a system the message is clearly that other people are potential obstacles to your success. There is also the abhorrent and indefensible practice of grading on a curve. Such practices create a culture that will occasionally erupt into outright violence as well as an us-against-them sensibility.

Schooling, including in most independent schools, is still by and large a process of teacher-directed instruction; it is not about students making meaning. It's still not about students helping each other understand controversial ideas and moving off in unpredictable directions. It's still not based on the questions that students have, or their need to make sense of the world. It's still about a bunch of facts being transmitted to students who are viewed as empty vessels. It's obviously a far cry from that kind of critique to talking about violence in schools, but it's all of a piece in a way, because children's intellectual, social and moral needs are often not being met – even in very expensive private schools.

**Thuermer:** What was your reaction to the Massachusetts students protesting the standardized test this past spring?

**Kohn:** These students have engaged in what I regard as thoughtful and courageous acts of conscience. They have stood up against the way that standardized testing and the whole "Tougher Standards" obsession has squeezed the intellectual life out of schools in this country. And the parents have been quite supportive and in some cases radicalized by the whole process. Every hour spent preparing a student for these tests is an hour not spent on helping kids to become thinkers. Very recently, a teacher on Cape Cod, alone, refused to administer the test to the students. It just makes me dream about three-quarters of a school faculty getting together and doing the same thing and holding a press conference to clearly explain that they're doing this for our kids and not for themselves.

I know one father of a high school student in Danvers, Massachusetts. His son had refused to take the test and the father didn't really understand why. But the authoritarian overreaching of the 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. The extraordinary thing is that you find seemingly intelligent folks holding up the nightmare scenarios of, say, the state of Texas or the city of Chicago as educational models. These myths are not just about the value of preparing kids for standardized testing. They encompass the whole notion that harder is better, that progress consists of more facts being memorized, and that a successful model of school change consists of top down coercion.

**Thuermer:** You talk about certain people - including parents, educators, and journalists - who have bought into what you call education myths. Can you help educate them?

**Kohn:** I'm trying. I've written a book on this subject that I hope will be read by parents, reporters, and others outside the educational community. It's called *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "Tougher Standards."*

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 kids' classrooms are a) largely based on what they had 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 in which I ask them a simple question: What do you want your kids to be like long after they've left you and left school? And everywhere people say: We want 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 using the same teacher-centered traditional model under which we were taught? You say you want kids to be caring and responsible, and yet you're using rewards and consequences that undermine a sense of responsibility and get kids hooked on trying to avoid the punishment and get the reward. The research clearly shows that kids who are rewarded or praised are less generous than their peers. It shows that kids raised in an environment of clear black-and-white rules, which they are expected to obey on pain of punitive consequence, are less likely to become ethically sophisticated. And if we're talking about the academic domain, the research shows that schools using traditional grading produce kids for whom three things are true: 1) they think less critically about the issues in front of them; 2) they prefer easier tasks if given the choice and will go out of their way to avoid challenge; and 3) they're less interested in learning.

For me, it's all about understanding the difference between reasonable, ambitious goals for kids and the worn out, illegitimate practices of teaching (which are now being made worse in the name of raising standards).

**Thuermer:** What would be the ideal education for your daughter? Do you plan to home school her?

**Kohn:** No, although I'm asked this at least once a week. There's a continuum: No school or teacher is going to overlap with my ideas about schooling 100 percent. And my own ideas change, too. It's much more common to find a teacher who thrills me than it is to find an entire school that has it right. Complicating the picture is that it's possible to find a school that I think has it right in terms of intellectual learning, but where they're still saying things like, "I like the way Abigail is sitting" – that sort of coercive public praise. They're still doing spelling bees and award assemblies that destroy community and replace it with an ethic of victory. They're still having adult controlled decision-making about most aspects of the children's lives. Similarly, I've found the reverse situation where on the social/moral issues the schools feel like caring communities, where the kids are active decision-makers, but they're still using worksheets, they're still listening to lectures, and they're still slogging through textbooks. This fact, which I've noticed over years of observing schools, makes me humble about the difficulty of getting things right on both sides of the academic/ non-academic divide.

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 brilliantly describes them. She notes that most kids are either spending all their time doing individual macaroni collages with nothing to engage the mind, or they're being stuffed full of colors, numbers and letters – using that sort of drill-and-skill approach at the age of four. Most preschools fit into one or the other. But there's a third possibility, which is a kind of project-based learning that is intellectually engaging without being academically stultifying.

**Thuermer:** Tell us what you're thinking about progressive schools these days.

**Kohn:** There are independent schools that have a tradition of progressive pedagogy but have lately been back-pedaling in a way that many of us find terribly discouraging – schools that are running away from labels like progressive and constructivist and chipping away at a very proud tradition that has now more research support than ever before. It's one thing to look at an institution that's always been very traditional and conservative. It's another to look at schools that have been blazing trails for everybody else now compromising on their essential mission to the point that those schools are indistinguishable from those in the mainstream.

Many of these schools are doing it because they are under pressure from their boards and their parent bodies or they are afraid that exciting, enthusiastic learning in a classroom might somehow prevent their kids 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 really good exploration-based science and whole language and constructivist mathematics are coming under attack as well.

My passionate hope is that schools with a progressive tradition hold the line and become more savvy about the way they sell this superior kind of education to a skeptical parent body. We need to talk about the rigors of whole language. We need to talk about the challenge of kids understanding ideas from the inside out rather than simply being prepared to get into Harvard – a process I call "Preparation H." We have to spend our time educating ourselves, one another, and the community outside schools to help people understand this problem. It is nothing short of a tragedy to see schools move in the direction of textbooks and spelling quizzes or to see upper schools that see themselves as doing nothing more than getting kids into college.

Children are not just adults in the making. They are not just miniature versions of university students. Their interests and needs and questions right now matter. We need a refresher course in John Dewey, Jerome Bruner, Howard Gardner, in a number of other thinkers who understand what learning is and can be.

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 many administrators – to the point that they have lost a sense of what they are about and can be about. Fear that if we do the best kind of learning, we're not going to be able to sell it to parents and we'll lose our customer base. In many cases they've given up without a fight. And this is a fight worth engaging in.

**Thuermer:** What should schools be doing?

**Kohn:** Above all, they should be taking the kids seriously. The best teachers are constantly trying to look at things from the students' point of view, figuring out what they already know, what lies behind their mistakes, what questions they care about. When I'm doing a workshop, I like to ask teachers "Which is larger, 5/19 or 7/22?" Almost everyone gets this wrong, especially math teachers. The correct answer is: Who cares? The fact that you may think kids ought to know which fraction is bigger doesn't change the reality that if you try to force bare facts or techniques down their throats, you'll not only turn them off to the process of learning; you'll also make it much less likely that they'll really understand what they're doing.

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 purpose. Figuring out the best way to divide up a pizza, or to calculate how fast I'm growing – those are the kinds of purposes that lead to real learning. In my book I describe some lessons I observed taught by teachers who were courageous enough to turn over a substantial amount of authority to the kids themselves. As a result, these kids weren't trying to guess what the teacher or the textbook wanted. They were thinking.

**Thuermer:** Does this entail a hands-off, laissez-faire approach to teaching?

**Kohn:** Hell, no. That's a caricature of progressivism kept alive by traditionalists who want to make their own stultifying methods look better. The best teachers are vitally active and involved, but not in propelling students toward right answers. Not in filling them full of facts. Not in giving them worksheets that consist of naked numbers, or disconnected sentences in which the point is to circle vowels or verbs. The teacher starts with the kids and then gently challenges them, subtly disorients them, throws them off balance with new ideas that the students have to struggle to reconcile with the way they'd been looking at things. This is really hard, of course. It takes effort and talent to work with kids to explore controversial issues, to design interdisciplinary projects with them, to assess their understanding by watching and listening instead of giving quizzes.

**Thuermer:** What are the signs that you're in such a classroom?

**Kohn:** There's usually an air of informality, first off. Also, the teacher's voice – and whole presence – is not the dominant one in the room. The kids are often in small groups, but even when they're all together, the whole-class discussions are remarkable because the kids are arguing directly with each other. The teacher isn't at the center of every exchange. This is especially hard for upper-school teachers to do; at least it was awfully hard for me. I prided myself on being an entertaining lecturer, very knowledgeable, funny, charismatic, and so on. It took me years to realize the classroom was all about me, not about the kids. It was about teaching, not about learning.

**Thuermer:** If you had to reinvent yourself tomorrow, Alfie, what would you do?

**Kohn:** I think if my career takes a turn in the next ten years, it's likely that I'll be thinking about raising kids and helping parents rethink the tendency to treat kids like pets. People have come up with cleverer ways of getting compliance – getting the kids to do what the parents want – as opposed to helping kids become responsible, caring, reflective people who can make decisions, who are socially skilled. Now that I'm a parent, this is increasingly an issue for me. A lot of it just deals with the fundamental lack of respect for children in this culture.

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