

Encouraging Courage

By Alfie Kohn

[This is a slightly expanded version of the published article.]

Education research doesn't always get the respect it deserves, but let's be honest: There's already enough of it to help us decide what to do (or stop doing) on many critical issues. Likewise, there are plenty of examples of outstanding classrooms and schools in which that research is being put into practice. What's lacking is sufficient courage for those examples to be widely followed.

It pains me to say this, but professionals in our field often seem content to work within the constraints of traditional policies and accepted assumptions — even when they don't make sense. Conversely, too many educators seem to have lost their capacity to be outraged by outrageous things. Handed foolish and destructive mandates, they respond only by requesting guidance on how to implement them. They fail to ask “Is this really in the best interest of our students?” or to object when the answer to that question is no.

The Cowardly Lion was able to admit that he lacked what made the muskrat guard his musk. Cowardly humans are more likely just to change the subject. Propose something that makes a meaningful difference, and you'll hear “But we've always...”, “But the parents will never...”, “But we can't be the only school in the area to...”

What, then, do truly courageous educators do? They dig deeper, they take responsibility, and they share power.

Digging Deeper. It requires gumption to follow one's principles wherever they lead. One may hope, for example, that children will be lifelong learners. One may even include that wish in a school's mission statement. But what if evidence and experience tell us that interest in learning declines when students are graded and also when they're made to work on academic assignments after they get home from school? Are we willing to say, “If we're serious about our goals, then we must be willing to question any traditional practices — including [grades](#) and [homework](#) — that prevent us from reaching them”?

Advanced Placement courses often just accelerate the worst kind of lecture-based, textbook-oriented instruction. They're “rigorous,” but that doesn't mean they're good. When it was reported that Scarsdale High School in New York joined other schools in deciding to drop all AP courses, an administrator at a nearby school circulated the article to his colleagues under the heading, “Do we have the guts?”

To dig deeper is to ask the root questions: not how many A.P. courses kids should take but whether to replace the College Board's curriculum with our own; not how much homework to assign but why kids should have to work a second shift every evening; not how to grade but whether to do so at all.

Even when practices seem to be producing good results, a courageous educator questions the criteria: “Wait a minute — we say this policy ‘works,’ but doesn’t that just mean it raises scores on bad tests?” “My classroom may be quiet and orderly, but am I promoting intellectual and moral development, or merely compliance?” “We look good because our graduates get into prestigious colleges, but isn’t that mostly because they come from affluent families? Are we helping them to become deep and passionate thinkers?”

Taking responsibility. The path of least resistance is to attribute problems to those who have less power than you. It’s much harder to say, as a San Diego teacher did, “If a child starts to act up, I ask myself: ‘How have I failed this child? What is it about this lesson that is leaving her outside the learning? How can I adapt my plan to engage this child?’ I stopped blaming my children.”

We have to be willing to take on the nay-sayers, to fight for what’s right even in the face of concerted opposition. Maureen Downey, a reporter for the Atlanta Journal Constitution, described how tough that can be in a culture where those “who speak up when they believe their students’ welfare is at stake, and who question the system, earn the label of troublemaker.” Lots of principals, she added, are “too cowed to practice ‘creative insubordination.’”

Parting with power. It takes guts, not just talent, for a teacher to lead students beyond a predictable search for right answers — and to let them play an active role in the quest for meaning that replaces it. That entails not only accepting some unpredictability and messiness but also giving up some control.

A Washington teacher was proud of herself for having posted this sign at the front of her classroom: “Think for yourself; the teacher might be wrong!” But gradually she realized that her classroom wasn’t really learner-centered. “I wanted [students] to think for themselves,” she confessed, “but only so long as their thinking didn’t slow down my predetermined lesson plan or get in the way of my teacher-led activity or argue against my classroom policies.” It takes courage to admit one hasn’t gone as far as one thought.

Over the years, I’ve met teachers who took a deep breath and let kids choose their own final grades, who tried out a no-homework policy to see what would happen, who stopped decorating the classroom by themselves and instead invited the kids to decide collectively how they wanted their classroom to look.

I’ve also met administrators who facilitated democratic decision-making among the staff instead of merely trying to get “buy in” to decisions they’d already made, who invited teachers to run the faculty meetings on a rotating basis rather than controlling all the meetings themselves (thereby modeling a top-down management style for teachers to reproduce in their classrooms), who suddenly realized that much of their airy talk about “responsibility,” “citizenship,” “character,” and “motivation” really just amounted to euphemisms for obedience.

*

These days the greatest barrier to meaningful learning is the standards-and-testing juggernaut, the top-down, corporate-styled mandates that are squeezing the life out of classrooms. This, therefore, is where courage may be needed most desperately. I’m heartened by teachers — most recently in Seattle, but before them in Colorado, Massachusetts, and Illinois — who have refused on principle to administer standardized tests. (“How can I teach my kids to stand up for what they believe in if I’m not doing that myself?” asked one Chicago test boycotter.) And by the Michigan high school teachers who rejected the obsessive and reductive focus on numerical “data” in the standard version of [“Professional Learning Communities”](#) in favor of a teacher-designed initiative to focus on what

students need. And by hundreds of Florida teachers who tore up or returned their bonus checks for having produced high test scores (read: for having taught in a rich district). And by the New York superintendent who announced “it’s time for civil disobedience” — and then worked to create an alternative diploma that wouldn’t be based on high-stakes tests.

I understand how real fear keeps more of us from doing what we know should be done. I don’t want to blame the victims, or minimize the culpability of those who pass bad laws. But if every educator who understood the damage done by these policies decided to speak out, to organize, to resist, then the policies would soon collapse of their own weight. I often hear from teachers and administrators who debate whether to do so, who struggle with whether to teach in a way that responds to students’ interests rather than follow a script or conform to prescriptive state (or national) standards. They know the risks but they also realize that Jonathan Kozol was right: “Abject capitulation to unconscionable dictates from incompetent or insecure superiors can be contagious.”

It takes courage to stand up to absurdity when all around you people remain comfortably seated. But if we need one more reason to do the right thing, consider this: The kids are watching us, deciding how to live their lives in part by how we’ve chosen to live ours.

Copyright © 2013 by Alfie Kohn. This article may be downloaded, reproduced, and distributed without permission as long as each copy includes this notice along with citation information (i.e., name of the periodical in which it originally appeared, date of publication, and author’s name). Permission must be obtained in order to reprint this article in a published work or in order to offer it for sale in any form. We can be reached through the [Contact Us](#) page. www.alfiekohn.org — © Alfie Kohn