

Can Everyone Be Excellent?

NEW YORK TIMES

June 16, 2019

Can Everyone Be Excellent?

By Alfie Kohn

[This is an expanded version of the published article, which was titled "Why Can't Everyone Get an A?"]

I was having dinner with Deborah Meier, the eminent educator, when our conversation turned, as it often does, to school reform. For a generation now, that phrase has come to signify a reliance on top-down, one-size-fits-all mandates for what students must be taught, enforced by high-stakes standardized tests. Debbie and I were both struck by the macho rhetoric – “rigor,” “raising the bar,” “tougher standards” – that’s used to justify these policies.

Around the time coffee was served, we hatched a thought experiment. Suppose that next year virtually every student in your state met the standards and passed the tests. What would the likely reaction be from politicians, businesspeople, and the media? Would these folks shake their heads in frank admiration and say, “*Damn*, those teachers must be good!”?

That response, of course, is improbable to the point of hilarity. Since that dinner, in fact, I’ve laid out this hypothetical scenario at dozens of education conferences, and audiences always say that such remarkable student success would immediately be cited as evidence that the tests were too

easy. (In the real world, when scores have improved sharply, this has indeed been the typical reaction. For example, results on New York's math exam rose in 2009, leading the chancellor of the state's Board of Regents to comment, "What today's scores tell me is not that we should be celebrating but that New York State needs to raise its standards.")

So what does this mean? The inescapable implication, Debbie and I realized, is that the phrase "high standards" in the context of education reform means *standards that all students will never be able to meet*. Because if everyone did meet them, the standards would just be ratcheted up again – as high as necessary to ensure that some students failed.

Its inspiring rhetoric notwithstanding, the standards-and-accountability movement is not about universal improvement or leaving no child behind. To the contrary, it is an elaborate sorting device, intended to separate wheat from chaff. The fact that students of color, students from low-income families, and students whose first language isn't English are disproportionately defined as chaff makes the whole enterprise even more insidious.

But our little thought experiment uncovers a truth that extends well beyond what has been done to our schools in the name of "raising the bar" (a phrase, incidentally, that seems to have originated in the world of show horses). We have been taught to respond with suspicion whenever all members of a defined group are successful. That's true even when we have no reason to believe that corners have been cut, or that the bar was suspiciously low. In America excellence is treated as an inherently scarce commodity.

Thus, rather than cheering when many people manage to do something well, we're likely to dismiss that result as meaningless and maybe even mutter darkly about "falling standards" or "being content with mediocrity." Success seems to matter only if it is attained by a few, and one way to

ensure that outcome is to evaluate people (or schools, or companies, or countries) relative to each other. That way, even if everyone has done quite well, or improved over time, half will always fall below the median – and look like failures.

Reframing excellence in competitive terms can't be defended on the grounds that setting people against one another leads to improvement in their performance. Indeed, a surprisingly consistent body of social science evidence shows that competition tends to hold us back from doing our best – particularly in comparison with cooperation, in which people work with, not against, each other. Rather, excellence has been *defined* – for ideological reasons – as something that can't be reached by everyone.

Consider widespread complaints about a supposed epidemic of “grade inflation” in higher education – a claim often accompanied by indignant expostulations about a sense of entitlement on the part of young people. There are two immediate problems with this narrative. First, it's not clear that grades are actually rising. Most statistics that indicate more A's now than at some point in the past (and it's not clear what the point for comparison should be) are based on student self-reports, which are notoriously unreliable. When official transcripts are used, the trend is much less clear. Second, even if more students today really were getting A's, that doesn't prove grades are inflated. One would have to show that those higher marks were undeserved. No one has ever demonstrated that students today receive A's for the same work that used to receive B's or C's.

But here's the key point: Many critics don't even bother to assert that grades have risen over time or are too generous. They simply point to how many students (in a given class or school) get A's right now – as if a sufficiently high number was objectionable on its face. “The essence of grading is exclusiveness,” said Harvey Mansfield, a Harvard political

science professor, adding that students “should have to compete with each other.” It doesn’t matter whether they’re all learning more or working harder. As Richard Kamber, a philosopher at The College of New Jersey, sees it, “If grades are to have any coherent meaning, they need to represent a relative degree of success.”

On this rather odd view of “coherent meaning,” the point isn’t to do well but to defeat other people who are also trying to do well. Grades should be used to announce who’s beating whom rather than providing information about individual accomplishments. And if the students in question have already been sorted by the admissions process so that elite institutions contain the very best, well, they ought to be sorted again *within* those institutions. No matter how well they all do, only a few should get A’s. A school’s ultimate mission, apparently, is not to help everyone learn but to rig the game so there will always be losers.

Conservative critics like Mansfield and Kamber are at least explicit in setting out a conception of education, and perhaps of life itself, as a race in which most cannot prevail. But many others hold this view implicitly – while exhorting all of us to strive for a status that all of us cannot attain. As Debbie Meier put it, it’s as if an elementary school teacher told her students that it’s time to line up for lunch “...and I want all of you to be in the front half of the line!”

This makes no more sense for adults than it does for children. Perhaps, for example, we can justify *rating* states or nations (based on the quality of their air, health care, or schools), but *ranking* them is foolish. Relative performance tells us nothing of interest because all of them may be shamefully low – or impressively high – on whatever measure we’re using. Moreover, the differences among them may not even be statistically significant. Comparative success just gives the winner bragging rights (“We’re number one!”). And, again, it creates the misleading impression of inevitable, permanent

failure.

But boy, do we love to rank. Worse, we create artificial scarcity such as awards – distinctions manufactured out of thin air specifically so that some cannot get them. Every contest involves the invention of a desired status where none existed before and none needs to exist. This creates an adversarial mentality that makes productive collaboration less likely, encourages gaming the system, and leads all concerned to focus not on meaningful improvement but on trying to outdo (and perhaps undermine) everyone else.

Most of all, it encourages the false belief that excellence or success itself is a zero-sum game. The sociologist Philip Slater once remarked that the manufacture of scarcity is the principal activity of American culture. Indeed, he added, many people “find it difficult to enjoy anything they themselves have unless they can be sure that there are people to whom this pleasure is denied.”

Perhaps it's time to rescue the essence of excellence – a more common-sense understanding of the idea that is also more democratic: Everyone may not get there, but at least in theory all of us could.

To be notified whenever a new article or blog is posted on this site, please enter your e-mail address at www.alfiekohn.org/sign-up.