
Introduction

More than a Score: The New Uprising Against High-Stakes Tests, edited by J. Hagopian (Haymarket Books, 2014)

By Alfie Kohn

In early March of 1999, on a chilly Sunday morning in San Francisco, more than a thousand educators packed into a huge convention center space during ASCD's annual conference. They were there for an event I was hosting called "The Deadly Effects of 'Tougher Standards,'" which I'd promised would be not just a presentation but "an organizing session, an attempt to form a national network of educators who have had enough and are ready to become politically active."

I should mention that I had (and have) no formal affiliation with any institution, no foundation support, no administrative assistant. At the time I didn't even own a copy machine. Nevertheless, I felt compelled to do something ambitious. I wanted to pull together folks from across the country who were as fed up as I was about prescriptive, one-size-fits-all curriculum standards; high-stakes testing; and the widespread tendency to classify these things as examples of "school reform." A gratifying number of people with families and full-time jobs — and, like me, no expectation of compensation or even an operating budget — signed up to be state coordinators in this new loose confederation.

The network had no official name, although I briefly considered "Standardized Testing Undermines the Process of Intellectual Development" just because I liked the acronym. I sent out periodic missives to urge the creation of listservs, phone trees, and rallies. I supported and exhorted, sharing background materials, and begging for news. At some point the challenge of finding time to coordinate all these coordinators — and to keep recruiting new volunteers to replace those who dropped out — came to be overwhelming. I eventually folded what was left of the network into a similar initiative being undertaken by [FairTest](#), which at least had a copy machine.

But the important point is that all of us were sufficiently outraged to invest a considerable amount of time in this effort. We promoted actions that ranged from polite letters to civil disobedience. And this, remember, was more than 15 years ago — before NCLB, Race to the Top, or Common Core, before most states had annual tests and high school exit exams, before the push for privatization had really gathered momentum. Back then, we thought things were really bad. And we were right. We just had no idea how much worse they could get.

In the early 2000s there were scattered examples of disciplined noncooperation. Teachers such as Don Perl in Colorado and Jim Bougas in Massachusetts stood up by themselves and refused to participate in the testing. High school students in northern California, Chicago, and Massachusetts

boycotted their states' exams. Parents opted their kids out of testing at, among other places, an inner-city elementary school in Tucson, AZ and the middle school in wealthy Scarsdale, NY (where two-thirds of the town's eighth graders were shuttled to the public library on test day so they might spend those hours actually learning something).

The standardistos, as Susan Ohanian calls them, were not pleased. When people in poor and minority communities resisted having their schools turned into test-prep factories, their objections were dismissed as sour grapes: Well, sure, they don't like testing because their scores are so low. But when people in affluent, high-scoring communities spoke out, they were accused of being too selfish to realize that test-based instruction is necessary for poor kids. An ad hoc — and ad hominem — reason was created to deflect each constituency's concerns so no one's had to be taken seriously.

The standards-and-testing apparatus was constructed by politicians and corporate executives, not by educators, a fact that explains a great deal about how things have played out. At some point these authorities appeared to realize that even if they lacked logic or research to justify all the testing — or the numbingly specific standards that the tests were being used to enforce — they did have one thing going for them. They had the power. They could insert a provision in NCLB to punish any school in which more than five percent of the students declined to take the tests. They could pressure superintendents and principals into becoming their accomplices. On the basis of a single test score, they could force a child to repeat third grade or refuse to issue a diploma to a high school student irrespective of his or her broader academic record. They could say what powerful people always say when they can't defend a dictate on its merits: "Like it or not, this is reality now, and we will hurt you if you don't comply." That's what's known as "holding students (or teachers) accountable."

And most people did comply, all along the food chain of American education, from state school board members down to classroom teachers. Almost all the wildfires of resistance were snuffed out for a time as the heavy-handed authority of state governments — and, under both George Bush and Barack Obama, the federal government — ratcheted up the specificity and uniformity of the standards, the pervasiveness and impact of the testing. People followed orders — even people who knew those orders made no sense and were doing considerable harm.

Back in the early 1960s, Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram began a series of studies "intended to measure the willingness of a participant to obey an authority" whose instructions "may conflict with the participant's personal conscience." Fascinated by the possibility that heinous crimes could be committed by ordinary people who just did what they were told, Milgram convinced volunteers to deliver what they believed were painful electric shocks to anonymous individuals. In 2007, the ABC news-magazine show *Primetime Live* broadcast a replication of the study. One subject they recruited was a seventh-grade teacher. After the experiment, when the set-up had been explained to her, she was asked about her willingness to inflict pain on a stranger, even after she heard that stranger crying out, "My heart hurts!"

Reporter: Just having the guy in the lab coat say, 'Keep going; it's fine; I'm telling you it's fine' somewhat divorced you from your own decision-making power?

Teacher: Oh sure. It's just like when I'm told to administer the state tests for hours on end.

Reporter: You're doing your job?

Teacher: I'm doing my job.

My point here isn't that teachers who administer these tests, or who sacrifice meaningful learning

opportunities in order to raise scores on those tests, are comparable to Nazis. My point is that, even if one has grave doubts about what one has been told to do, it can take courage to refuse to do it, particularly if there are risks to disobeying orders, as there often are. Yet we are now witnessing another wave of such disobedience, as evidenced by the heartening accounts contained in this book.

The examples you'll find here [in [More Than a Score](#)] are varied and often inventive: administering student tests to successful adults in Providence and asking them to share their impressions, creating a clever (musical) holiday-themed protest in Portland, putting up lawn signs and bumper stickers in New York, staging a "play-in" at the Chicago Board of Education, holding a rally in Texas. You'll read about individual acts of conscience and organized mass actions.

One recurrent theme is that many people who already oppose the standards-and-testing juggernaut seem to be waiting for someone else to take the lead and give them permission (or the necessary courage) to stand up. When South Minneapolis teachers merely informed parents they had the right not to have their children tested, 40 percent of those parents promptly took advantage of that reminder. Garfield High School teachers in Seattle, with their dramatic and widely publicized test boycott, had a similar experience: The expressions of support and solidarity they received make it clear that many others shared their frustrations, and what these teachers did helped to transform widespread potential energy into kinetic energy. An awful lot of people have felt as if they were alone. It can be liberating to learn otherwise, to see that countless others share that anger about what is being done to our children and our schools, and they may be persuaded to do something about it at last.

On the other hand, if we persist in following orders, in teaching the inappropriate and generic standards devised by distant authorities, in ignoring our students' interests so as to ready them for bad tests, then we become part of the "they" that others invoke to justify the impossibility of making change. As Carol Burris says, by way of explaining her decision to mobilize opposition among New York principals, "There comes a point where you just have to stand up for what's right." Likewise Texas educator John Kuhn: "What may not have been the best thing...for my career" may nevertheless have been the best thing he could have done for his kids.

In 1846, when Thoreau was imprisoned for refusing to pay war taxes, the jail in Concord, Massachusetts, faced the street. One day, the story goes, his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson was walking by and said, "Henry! What are you doing in there?" To which Thoreau was said to have replied, "The question is what are you doing out there?"

For anyone who accepts the arguments and insights of the contributors to this volume, the challenge is to explain why he or she is helping to perpetuate pernicious policies by taking part in the testing. The challenge is not just to applaud the eloquence and courage of the educators, parents, and students who have taken a stand, but to summon one's gumption and join them.

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