

Requesting Testing

By Alfie Kohn

One of the most disturbing educational consequences of high-stakes testing has been the diminution or even elimination of activities that are not tested. If it's not on the exam, it doesn't count - and so teachers feel they don't have the luxury of holding class meetings to promote democratic decision-making, or discussing current events, or designing interdisciplinary projects, or even allowing young children time for recess. Much as grade-grubbing students are famous for asking, "Do we have to know this?", teachers and administrators now want to know, "Do we have to teach this?"

The same dynamic is at work with respect to parts of the conventional curriculum: at least three subject areas - science, social studies, and the arts - regularly get short shrift when most or all of the testing at a given grade level is limited to math and language arts. This has created an excruciating dilemma for people in those three fields: Without tests, those subjects may not be taught, but with tests, those subjects may be taught badly (that is, in such a way as to prepare students for dubious tests). It's rather like a dysfunctional family, in which children are either neglected or abused.

That said, I have become increasingly concerned that some educators have chosen the "Test Us, Too!" option without sufficient appreciation of the risks involved. To request standardized testing in order to make sure one's subject matter receives adequate time, attention, and resources is to make a bargain with the devil. Language arts teachers offer eloquent testimony about how their curriculum has been warped in a desperate effort to raise test scores. One of my favorite examples is a New York City teacher who was asked whether she still gives her students the chance to read books of their own choosing during class. She replied, "We haven't been doing any reading since we started preparing the kids for the reading test."

It's not difficult to imagine a similarly pointed paradox in other fields - e.g., We haven't been doing any science since we started preparing the kids for the science test. Indeed, science and social studies tests are even more likely than English and math tests to require students to cough up dates and definitions, forgettable facts and isolated skills. To an alarming extent, the best teaching in these fields (which helps kids learn what it means to think like a scientist or an historian - or to immerse oneself in artistic endeavors) is poor preparation for standardized tests. Conversely, preparing students for the tests most effectively may entail the worst kind of teaching. To seek out standardized testing in a field that has managed to avoid it is to intensify this very difficult choice for teachers.

I'm well aware that the absence of tests can mean a drastic reduction in time for science, the elimination of music, and so on. But is it possible we are becoming accomplices in a process that destroys our fields in order to save them? Regardless of what we decide, there should at least be a vigorous discussion about the costs involved before we put ourselves in the position of actually

requesting high-stakes tests.

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