

**Standardized Testing:  
Separating Wheat Children  
from Chaff Children**

## Standardized Testing Separating Wheat Children from Chaff Children

*Excerpted from the foreword to Susan Ohanian's book What Happened to Recess and Why Are Our Children Struggling in Kindergarten? (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002)*

By Alfie Kohn

Of all the chasms that separate one world from another, none is greater than the gap between the people who make policy and the people who suffer the consequences. There are those who reside comfortably on Mount Olympus, issuing edicts and rhetoric, and then there are those down on the ground who come to know the concrete reality behind the words. It's the difference between a legislator who casually runs his pen through a budget item (perhaps smiling to himself about reducing the size of government) and a struggling single Mom who learns that there will be no help with heating oil expenses this winter. It's the difference between a man with a chest full of ribbons who pokes a pin into a map (perhaps muttering about the need to push back the enemy's perimeter) and a young man on the scene whose liver is suddenly punctured by a sniper's bullet.

And it's the difference between important grown-ups who piously exhort us to hold our educational system "accountable" and a nine-year-old who has come to detest school because the days are now full of practice tests in place of projects and puzzles. Up there: people pounding the pulpits about the need for World-Class Standards. Down here: little kids weeping, big kids denied diplomas on the basis of a single exam score, wonderful teachers reduced to poring over the want ads.

There is a lot to be said about the spurious logic of the Tougher Standards movement and about the way standardized tests measure what matters least. The arguments and evidence are there, for anyone who cares to peer behind the sanctimonious rhetoric, or investigate the way exams are designed and used. My file cabinets are bulging with arresting arguments and damning data.

But there is also room for an existentialist perspective. Widespread misinterpretations of that philosophical movement notwithstanding, existentialism starts with the fact that each of us is a center of experience, the one who perceives and acts in and reflects on a world. It rebels against the systems and practices that crush or deny your subjectivity by reducing you to a part of a crowd, a scientific datum, or a pale approximation of some transcendent reality.

Once, the existentialists rebelled against Hegelian essentialism or Platonic forms. Today, they – we – are called upon to rebel against people who don't think about children "except as they distribute themselves across deciles," as Robert Hogan, former director of the National Council of Teachers of English, once put it. Yes, it's important to develop greater insight into the intellectual architecture of problematic practices, to gather data that builds a case against them. But it's also important that we not dismiss our natural first reaction when we hear about the dimensions of this testing fad: "Are we out of our *minds*? What in the hell have we been letting them do to our kids?"

A couple of hundred years ago, Kant told us that the one thing we're not permitted to do, morally speaking, is to treat people as means to an end, as tools or instruments to achieve other objectives. It's been a while since I've read him, but I don't recall that he made an exception for really short people who don't eat their vegetables. Thus, it will not do to sacrifice children on the altar of accountability, to use them in a giant high-stakes experiment and ignore the very real harm it does.

About a year ago, Deborah Meier and I were having one of those dinners where we try to figure out the fundamental nature of the Tougher Standards movement before the check arrives. On that particular night we stumbled upon a very dark possibility, one that is perhaps best communicated in the form of a thought experiment. Suppose that next year almost all the students in your state met the standards and passed the tests. What do you suppose would be the reaction from the politicians, businesspeople, and newspaper editorialists? Would these folks shake their heads in frank admiration and say, "Damn, those teachers are good"? That possibility, of course, is improbable to the point of hilarity. Every time I've laid out this hypothetical scenario, audiences tell me that across-the-board student success would immediately be taken as evidence that the tests were too easy.

So what does that mean? The inescapable implication, as Meier points out, is that the phrase "high standards" by definition refers to standards that everyone won't be able to meet. If everyone could meet them, that would be taken as *prima facie* proof that the standards were too low – and they would then be ratcheted upward – *until failures were created*. Despite its sugar-coated public-relations rhetoric, the whole standards-and-accountability movement is not about helping all children to become better learners. It is not committed to leaving no child behind. Just the opposite: it is an elaborate sorting device, separating wheat from chaff. And don't ask what happens to the chaff.

It's one thing to justify this heartless enterprise in the name of capital-letter abstractions, like Excellence or Higher Expectations. That leaves one with a bad taste. But when the process of flunking vast numbers of children, or forcing them to drop out, or turning whole schools into giant test-prep factories is rationalized as being in the best interest of poor and minority students – the ones who actually suffer most from high-stakes testing – then one staggers backward at the sickening paradox, the sheer Orwellian audacity of the Standardistos.

Often, of course, they can succeed in raising average test scores. You deprive kids of recess, eliminate music and the arts, cut back the class meetings and discussions of current events, offer less time to read books for pleasure, squeeze out the field trips and interdisciplinary projects and high-quality electives, spend enough time teaching test-taking tricks, and, you bet, it's possible to raise the scores. But that result is meaningless at best. When a school or district reports better test results this year than last, knowledgeable parents and other observers respond by saying, "So what?" (because higher test scores do not necessarily reflect higher quality teaching and learning) – or even, "Uh oh" (because higher test scores may indicate *lower* quality teaching and learning).

And once you realize that the tests are unreliable indicators of quality, then what possible reason would there be to subject kids – usually African American and Latino kids – to those mind-numbing, spirit-killing, regimented instructional programs that were designed principally to raise test scores? If your only argument in favor of such a program is that it improves results on deeply flawed tests, you haven't offered any real argument at all. Knock out the artificial supports propping up "Success for All," "Open Court," "Reading Mastery," and other prefabricated exercises in drilling kids to produce right answers (often without any understanding), and these programs will then collapse of their own dead weight.

To knock out those supports, though, we must offer a sustained critique that embraces both data and experience. Not to sound like Ecclesiastes, but there is a time for studies and a time for stories, a place for both heated outrage and cool analysis.

Similarly, there is room for a range of strategies, from mild letters to the editor all the way to civil disobedience. Every parent in North America who doubts that a standardized test score accurately reflects the proficiencies and possibilities of his or her child, every parent who worries about the educational consequences of this testing fad, should realize that there is no earthly reason why that child should be sent to school on the days the tests are given. That's the enduring lesson of the civil rights movement: bad practices or unjust laws can continue only with our cooperation and consent. If, having educated and mobilized our neighbors, we withhold that consent and refuse to cooperate in what is being done to (all) our kids, then we can restore sanity to the schools – and, while we're at it, bring back recess.

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