

Tests That Cheat Students

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By Alfie Kohn

The allegations that some New York City teachers may have cheated to raise their students' test scores should surprise no one – partly because of similar accusations elsewhere but also because of the enormous pressure on educators to produce better results.

We would do well to look at how heavy-handed demands for “tougher standards” and “accountability” not only invite cheating but also cheat children out of opportunities for meaningful learning. Almost every state has issued standards mandating what all students at a given grade level must know. Apart from embodying the dubious premise that all children must develop at the same pace, these standards are often marked by an extraordinary specificity. A typical state document might say, for example, that children at a particular level must be able to use the Reader's Guide and know about zygote formation – an instructional approach that promotes rote recall ahead of understanding.

The standards can be ludicrously unrealistic. One in Virginia, for example, says fourth graders are required to “evaluate the social, political, and economic life in Virginia from the Reconstruction period to the 20th century . . . and its impact on politics and government, the economy, demographics, and public opinion; the impact of segregation . . . and the economic and social transition from a rural, agricultural society to a more urban, industrialized society.” And that's only one standard in only one field – for 9-year-olds.

Other states use the same sort of lofty language but then give students tests that fall far short of what it promises. A Massachusetts standard stipulates that 10th graders “will understand the meaning, implications, and import of historical events while recognizing the contingency and unpredictability of history.” But here is a question students must answer to show they are meeting this standard: “Which individual led independence movements in 19th century South America: (a) Simon Bolivar, (b) Fidel Castro, (c) Francisco Pizarro, or (d) Gustavus Adolphus?”

Many states are giving so-called high-stakes tests: A student who has not crammed names, dates and facts into short-term memory is denied a high-school diploma regardless of academic record, or an elementary student must repeat a grade based on a single test score.

Researchers in Colorado asked some fourth-grade teachers to teach a specific task. About half the teachers were told that when they were finished, their students would have to “perform up to standards” on a test. The other teachers were simply invited to “facilitate the children's learning.” At the end, when all the students were tested, it turned out that students in the “standards” classrooms did a poorer job on the task.

Every hour spent on such exam preparation is an hour not spent helping students to become critical, creative, curious learners.

A few years ago, a middle-school teacher in Cambridge, Mass., devised a remarkable unit. Every student picked an activity that he or she cared about and became an expert in it. Each subject, from baking to ballet, was researched intensively, described in a detailed report and taught to other children. The idea was to hone researching and writing skills while also heightening children's appreciation for the craftsmanship involved in many different activities. It was the kind of experience that people look back on years later as a highlight of school. But thanks to the new state standardized exam, that unit has been struck from the curriculum. The teacher is too busy helping students master prescribed material.

Some officials are sincere in their desire to use standards and testing as a way to close gaps between white and black, rich and poor. The reality is that many second-rate schools in the inner city are becoming third-rate as students are drilled day after day to pass the tests.

The most promising models of teaching have trouble surviving in such a climate. Central Park East Secondary School in New York holds students to genuinely high standards by asking them to prepare projects exhibiting their learning. Deborah Meier, the school's co-founder, attracted worldwide attention for its extraordinary success with a largely poor, African-American population. Recently she commented that judging all students in New York on the basis of the Regents exam “will spell the slow demise” of schools like hers.

Small wonder that some parents and students around the country are simply refusing to be part of the testing programs. In the last year alone, boycotts have sprung up in several states. These acts of civil disobedience – along with less admirable responses like cheating – will probably grow until the message is heard: Raising scores is completely different from helping students to learn.

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