

Tougher Tests = Lower Standards

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By Alfie Kohn

Pronouncements about the need for school reform – along with decrees for how it must be done – issue regularly from Mount Olympus, where, as it happens, no children live. These declarations often contain phrases like "tougher standards," "raising the bar," and "increased accountability."

But how do things look from down on the ground? A few years ago, a Cambridge middle school teacher devised a remarkable unit in which every student picked an activity that he or she cared about and then proceeded to become 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 heighten everyone's appreciation for the complexity of these activities as well as to hone researching and writing skills. In short, it was the kind of academic experience that people look back on years later as a highlight of their time in school.

But thanks to the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, that unit has been struck from the curriculum. "Because we have so much content material to cover, I don't have the time to do it," the teacher explained ruefully. "I mean, I've got to do the Industrial Revolution because it's going to be on the test."

These days, stories like that are common across the country. The dirty little secret of American education in the late 1990s is that the intellectual life is being squeezed out of classrooms because policy makers who don't know very much about how children learn have decided it's time to get tough.

The situation verges on nightmarish in places like the Chicago public schools and the state of Texas, both of which rely on "high stakes" exams: Students perform well on a one-shot, poorly designed, fact-based test or else they are prevented from graduating (regardless of their academic record) or are condemned to repeat a grade (despite overwhelming evidence that holding students back is counterproductive).

Such policies have transformed entire schools into what are essentially giant test-prep centers. Yes, scores may start to rise, but the cost to the quality of education is incalculable. The more schools commit themselves to improving performance on these dreadful tests, the more meaningful opportunities to learn are sacrificed. Paradoxically, high scores are often a sign of *lowered* standards.

Yet education officials and journalists in Massachusetts actually look to these areas as models for what should be done to children here. It has already been announced that in 2003, the high school version of the MCAS will become a high-stakes test: If, for example, a student has not memorized the definitions of lysosomes, ribosomes, and vacuoles (to cite an actual question), he or she might be denied a diploma. On Mt. Olympus, it might be possible to defend a policy like that – or, indeed, to defend almost anything – by invoking the magic words "higher standards." In the real world, though, the likely effects include an increase in the number of dropouts and a level of anxiety that interferes with learning. The latter has already begun to happen because of the MCAS. In June, the Massachusetts commissioner of education, David Driscoll, conceded "that there's a lot of pressure, that fourth graders are crying." His response: "That's the way the world is."

The state's decision last spring to spend \$20 million on programs designed to improve MCAS scores might make sense if that process helped students become better thinkers. In fact, the two are not only different but actually tend to pull in opposite directions. Every hour our children spend being drilled on test-taking skills or memorizing a mass of forgettable facts that few adults know or need to know is an hour they are not spending making sense of ideas.

No other country in the world subjects children to the barrage of testing that American students must endure. While Japan, for example, is known for its university admission exam, it has no standardized tests at all up until that point. Some observers believe that it is precisely this freedom from testing pressures that helps explain the exceptional achievement of Japanese students.

Furthermore, our own children must cope not only with more testing but with a system that encourages competition, such that the point is to beat kids in other communities. It is not an exaggeration to say that every time a newspaper publishes a chart that ranks the test scores of each school or town, the quality of our children's education gets a little bit worse.

Fortunately, the MCAS is not a reality that must be accepted. Rather, it reflects a series of political decisions that can be opposed and eventually reversed by parents and teachers concerned about how standardized testing is dumbing down our schools.

Last summer, a grass-roots coalition of parents in Wisconsin stopped a high-stakes graduation test in its tracks. In Michigan and Ohio, parents are organizing boycotts of their states' exams. Locally, students in Danvers, Newton, and Cambridge have courageously refused to be part of the testing program, and a teacher in Harwich decided he could not in good conscience hand out the exams. These acts of education and civil disobedience will continue to grow until the message is heard up on the mountain: Raising scores is completely different from helping students to learn.

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