

The Worst Kind of Cheating

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By Alfie Kohn

My file folder on the subject is bulging: at the back is a yellowing article called "Cheating Scandal Jars a Suburb of High Achievers," published a decade ago in the *New York Times*. At the front: "Teachers Face Firing in Cheating Scandal," which recently appeared in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. But put aside the details for a moment and consider the bigger picture. These days educators are feeling pressure to raise test scores that ranges from significant to excruciating, depending on where they work. What many of them fail to realize is that succeeding at this task is no real victory. Higher scores are, at best, meaningless, and, at worst, reason for concern.

Why "meaningless"? Because scores can rise for several reasons that have nothing to do with better teaching and learning. First, there's a statistical phenomenon known as regression to the mean, which says that a school with very low scores will probably have higher ones next year by chance alone.

Second, two economists recently calculated that 50 to 80 percent of test score improvement from one year to the next is completely unrelated to changes in instruction. Rather, it's a function of changes in the environment and the fact that a different group of kids is being tested. This finding was recently replicated in a second state, where most of the schools that showed big increases from year 1 to year 2 then lost ground in year 3 – not because people got lazy but because the earlier gain wasn't real.

Third, scores can go up as a result of cheating – three kinds of cheating, to be precise:

* *Explicit cheating* is the kind reported in all those articles, where students are supplied with answers, or their answer sheets are changed after the fact. Everyone agrees this is unethical, but more attention should be focused on the morality of using coercive high-stakes techniques on students, teachers, and principals: "Raise your scores – or else."

* *Hidden cheating* occurs when principals play games to raise the scores by (a) holding low-scoring students back a year – not because it's in their best interest (which it almost never is) but because they'll be a year older when they take the test, (b) classifying more students as "special needs" if that will exclude their scores, or (c) lavishing attention on students who are just shy of passing, ignoring those who are sure to do well and those likely to fail.

* What I refer to as *legal cheating* is more commonly called teaching to the test. When real instruction gives way to preparing students for a particular exam, then scores can be raised without improving learning at all. Several states have seen overall scores start out low and get higher year by year. Then a new test is substituted and the scores promptly plummet. This doesn't mean schools were actually getting better and then worse again. *The more pressure to raise scores, the less valid the tests are as measures of learning.*

However, higher test scores may not be merely meaningless. They may be reason to worry. First, standardized tests tend to measure what matters least. At least three separate studies have found a negative correlation between test scores and the depth of students' thinking.

Mostly, though, we should worry because of what schools are sacrificing in order to focus on raising test scores: recess, music and the arts, inquiry-based science, the time to read good books, interdisciplinary projects, class meetings, field trips, discussion of current events – the list goes on and on. If a school reports higher test scores, knowledgeable parents will reply, "Uh-oh.

What did you have to strip away from my child's education to make that happen?"

So what can we do? Make the release of test results a nonevent. Never brag about high or rising scores; never pressure teachers to improve test results. Do all you can to *protect* them from that kind of pressure. Give parents appropriate ways to judge your school so you can be held accountable by meaningful criteria: the extent to which students are excited about learning and the school feels like a caring community, the depth of thinking that takes place in classrooms, and so on. Explain exactly why it's misleading and destructive to use test scores as a marker for quality.

We have to join together, mobilize, become politically active to roll back this testing juggernaut.

Standardized tests aren't like the weather, something we just learn to live with. They are the result of political decisions, and therefore can be challenged, modified, and even eliminated by an organized opposition.

If we allow our schools to be turned into giant test-prep centers, then we are complicit in the most egregious kind of cheating of all: We are helping to cheat kids out of a decent education.

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