

# The Back-to-School-Night Speech We'd Like to Hear

October 4, 2015

---

## The Back-to-School-Night Speech We'd Like to Hear\*

By Alfie Kohn

Is this working? [taps microphone] I do believe it is!

OK, if everyone can please find a seat, we'd like to get started. Thanks so much for coming out tonight! We've reserved plenty of time for discussion – obviously I'm not going to talk at you all evening, just as our teachers don't spend most of class time talking at your kids – but as the principal I did want to try to give you a sense of what \_\_\_\_\_ School stands for, and what your student, and you, can expect this year.

Our top priority here – and I mean a real, honest-to-goodness commitment, not just a slogan on the website or in a mission statement – is to learn about and support each student's interests. What questions do they have about the world? How can we help them build on and find answers to those questions? When we meet as a staff, it's usually to think together about how best to do that, how to create a school that's not just academic but intellectual.

We don't want to write a detailed curriculum or devise a bunch of rules in advance and then spend the year demanding that kids conform to them. Our main concern is that what students are learning, and how they're helped to learn it, make sense for the particular kids in a

given room. That's why our teachers spend a lot more time asking than telling – and even more time listening to what the *kids* wonder about. The plan for learning is created *with* your kids, not just *for* them.

Take Ms. \_\_\_\_\_ and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, who are both standing in the back of the room, over there near the fire alarm. (Say hello!) They teach the same grade and the same subjects, but do they have the same curriculum – the same topics in the same order with the same reading list and assignments? Well, of course not! Because they teach different kids! And I happen to know that much of what each of them is teaching this year is also different from what they were teaching last year. For the same reason.

A good way to tell how successful we are is how excited the students are about figuring stuff out and playing with ideas. Nurturing their *desire* to learn is more important to us than cramming them full of definitions and dates and details that they're likely to forget anyway. Plus, in my experience, when that excitement is there, academic excellence tends to follow – assuming they've been given the support and resources they need.

So if your children ever seem reluctant to come to school, if you get a sense that they see what they're doing here as a chore, please let us know! Hating school isn't a fact of life; it's a problem to be solved. We're not going to talk about "how to motivate them" or just expect them to "improve their attitude"; it's *our* responsibility to improve what happens in school. And if it turns out that the curiosity of our students is being smothered by practices that we've come to take for granted, well, we're not going to say, "Too bad. That's life." We're going to rethink those practices.

You want a couple of examples? Well, I think I can safely say – and feel free, teachers, to contradict me here – that all of us on the staff used to assume that things like grades, tests, homework, and textbooks were just part of the educational package. So we focused on the details of how we did them – what seem to us now like piddly little questions. We would solemnly ask: Should grades be posted online – and what's the best way to do that? Or: Exactly how many

minutes of homework should be assigned? Should students be permitted to retake tests? Should textbooks be available digitally? (Boy, that's "innovation" for you, huh? The same collection of predigested facts from a giant publishing conglomerate but, hey, now it's on an iPad!)

Anyway, we gradually realized that because we were so busy asking how to implement x, y, and z, we had let ourselves off the hook by failing to ask whether x, y, or z should be done at all. For instance, a lot of studies have shown that when you give kids grades, they tend to lose interest in what they're learning – and also become less thoughtful in the way they learn it. So if we can offer kids (and also you parents) much more meaningful feedback about how they're doing in school – through written observations and, better yet, in-person conversations – then why would we risk smothering their excitement about learning by slapping a letter or number on them? We were doing real damage by training kids to think that the point of going to school is to get A's. The solution wasn't to implement "standards-based grading," or to change "A" to "greatly exceeds expectations," or ramp up the use of rubrics (which basically take all that's wrong with grades and intensify it). No. The solution was to get rid of grading entirely and replace it with something better. So that's just what we've done. And the results have been nothing short of amazing.

The same thing is true with other old-fashioned practices. Homework creates frustration, anxiety, boredom, exhaustion – and it's no fun for the kids either! (Ba-dum-bum). So we really paid attention when we discovered teachers – some in our school, some in other schools – who had completely stopped assigning homework and found real improvement in the way kids felt about school, about learning, about themselves, and about their teachers – all without detracting from the quality of their learning. True, kids end up doing less drill and practice when they're free to do what they enjoy after school, but our teachers have gone way beyond the old drill-and-practice approach anyway!

We've seen similar benefits after educating ourselves about how to evaluate kids' understanding of ideas without using tests. And about how textbooks can be left on the shelves, to be consulted occasionally like reference sources, rather than dictating course content. What?? A

school without tests or textbooks?? Yes. It's not only possible; it opens new possibilities for learning – to the point that we wondered why we hadn't ditched these relics years ago.

Well, let's be honest. *Some* of us wondered that. Others of us are still a little, um, uneasy about completely getting rid of these traditional practices. Some of us understandably need help teaching with primary sources instead of textbooks. Or getting better at knowing how well students are doing (or how we're doing) without giving kids tests and quizzes. Or doing what needs to be done during class instead of saddling kids with more schoolwork after the school day is over.

So we're still struggling with some of this. But we're pretty sure at least we're asking the right questions now. And I'm happy to report that this shift is taking place in all the schools in our district – elementary, middle, and high schools, since everything I'm talking about tonight is relevant to all grade levels. In fact, at the risk of making your head explode, I could mention that the same is true of a bunch of other features of Old Style education that we're also starting to look at skeptically now: segregating kids by age, or teaching different subjects separately, or even making kids raise their hands so that the teacher alone decides who gets to talk when. If there are solid reasons to keep doing these things, fine. If not, well, “that's the way things have always been done” is a pretty lame justification for not making a change, isn't it?

Maybe you won't be surprised to hear that those of us who are committed to doing right by kids tend not to take kindly to dictates handed down by people who have never *met* your kids. If distant authorities announce a new set of standards – you know, “All *n*th graders will now have to be taught such-and-such” – and we just followed their orders blindly, well, we wouldn't be acting like professional educators, would we? Our classrooms are student-centered and much of the learning is student-designed. It's organized around their questions, around projects and problems that intrigue them. (By “them,” I mean not only individual kids but whole classrooms; the learners think these things through together.) So if, after the fact,

we can figure out a way to draw a connection between their learning and the latest top-down standards, well, peachy. That reassures people higher up the food chain and makes my job a little more secure. But for heaven's sake, we're not going *start* with those one-size-fits-all standards and let them determine what we teach!

And if that's true, we're sure as heck going to resist being judged by standardized tests. It's bad enough when the word "data" is overused – as if learning, and learners, can be reduced to numbers. It's even worse when those numbers turn out to be test scores. Please, folks, don't ever assume that just because it's a number that means it's objective. Or meaningful. We often come across students who are incredibly impressive thinkers but just don't test well. Frankly, we also see some whose thinking isn't all that amazing but, holy cow, they're awfully good at taking tests. The test results make the first group look bad and the second group look great. In other words, those numbers are really misleading about kids – and also, I have to say, about teachers. What I've learned from all my years in education is that the main thing standardized tests do is make mediocre teaching seem impressive. At the same time, they fail to capture the results of amazing teaching.

Because we don't think your kids' achievements and potential can be captured by how many bubbles they fill in correctly, you'll never catch us bragging about the school's test results – or training students to be better test takers. Hold us accountable for helping your child to be a deep thinker who loves learning. Expect creativity. Expect curiosity. But don't expect us to raise their scores. I don't doubt that we *could* produce impressive results on unimpressive tests. But to do that, we'd probably have to scale back music and the arts, get rid of those wonderful democratic class meetings that build community and empower students, eliminate hands-on projects outside the school that we're famous for, and give kids less time to read for pleasure. Among many other things. We'd become, excuse the expression, a crappy school that looks good to real estate agents and politicians and newspaper editorial writers. So please, please, please don't judge us by test results. Judge us by what matters. We'll return the favor

by teaching what matters to your kids. (And if you have questions about more meaningful indicators of success and failure, just send me an e-mail or stop by my office, and I'll gladly talk your ear off.)

Speaking of talking your ear off, what time is it? [Looks at watch.] Yikes. I want to get to your questions and reactions, and then of course we're going to break up in small groups, as we always do on Back to School night, to talk about education. (We've noticed that when we raise big issues with parents, they take us up on our invitation to discuss them. Whereas if we just list rules and procedures, then that's all they ask about.) Anyway, bear with me as I quickly touch on a couple more issues.

We talk a lot about the importance of creating a caring community of learners. Actually, I guess lots of schools use phrases like that, but one way we prove we really mean it is by making sure we don't do anything that *disrupts* a feeling of community – like setting kids against each other in a contest for awards or recognition. The day we start publicly singling out one child as better than everyone else is the day we've given up on the ideal of community. This doesn't mean we don't care about excellence. Just the opposite! Real excellence comes from helping students to see one another as potential collaborators. Sorting them into winners and losers leads each kid to see everyone else as a rival. That undermines achievement (as well as caring and trust) for winners and losers alike. So instead of awards assemblies, you can expect to be invited to student-designed celebrations of what all of us have accomplished together. These ceremonies can be amazingly moving, by the way. If you're used to those rituals where a few kids are called up to the stage to be applauded for having triumphed over their peers, well, you're in for a real treat.

Because we take kids – all kids – so seriously here at \_\_\_\_\_, and because we treat them, and their ideas, with respect, we tend to have remarkably few discipline problems. Few, not none. When there is a problem, we don't talk about it in terms of a kid's "behavior" that needs to be changed; we ask what's going on beneath the behavior. Sometimes what's going on is that something about the school isn't working for that child. That's not a signal to fix the child, to lean

on him until he does what he's told. You're sending us your children, not your pets, so we don't use rewards and consequences. We don't bribe or threaten them to make them behave. Hey, we don't like to be treated that way, so why would we treat our students that way? We don't use point systems, or dangle prizes in front of them, or use other strategies of control. Those gimmicks don't really work in the long run, and they're an awfully disrespectful way to treat people of any age. Besides, we find that when the learning is engaging, when our requests are reasonable, when we view students as people to be consulted rather than as bundles of behaviors to be reinforced, most of the time they live up to our expectations. Or even go beyond them.

As the year unfolds, we'll send you occasional letters and e-mails – and update our website – about how all this is playing out, about how your child is doing and, more important, *what* your child is doing. Some teachers host their own blogs or send out periodic newsletters. But don't be worried if sometimes they write things like, "We had a conflict in class that made some kids unhappy so we called a class meeting to work it out" or "Hey, I tried a new way to introduce an unfamiliar concept today, and it bombed so I'm not likely to do *that* again." If we sent you updates that were always upbeat, implying that every kid loved – and succeeded at – every activity, we'd quickly lose all credibility and you'd discount everything you heard from us. So we'll be tactful but honest in sharing the challenges we're facing.

By the same token, I'm not going to close now by offering cliches about how precious your children are to us. Instead, I figure we'll *show* you – by what we do as the days go by and, just as important, by what we don't do. I try to steer away from empty, feel-good sentiments like, for example, "All children can learn," which is kind of silly. All children can learn *what?* is how you'd probably respond. Obviously everyone can't learn everything, but the more important question is whether a given thing we're asking them to learn is really worth learning. That's what we should be talking about. And that's what we do talk about – not only at staff meetings but with the kids. That's what defines our approach to education, in fact.

Is this working? I do believe it is!

---

*\* Inspired by an occasional feature in Mad magazine called "Scenes We'd Like to See." And counterinspired by some back-to-school talks we've actually heard.*

---

To be notified whenever a new article or blog is posted on this site, please enter your e-mail address at [www.alfiekohn.org/sign-up](http://www.alfiekohn.org/sign-up)