

Gleanings #3: Test Boycotts, Death to the Syllabus, and Why Secretaries of Education Are Never Educators

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By Alfie Kohn

MORE GLEANINGS – that is, writings from various sources likely to be of interest to anyone drawn to the work on this website. This month, we feature an article, a website, a quote, and news of an important campaign of resistance. Also, note that a new essay about progressive education has been posted elsewhere on this site.

Act of Resistance: *There is something uncomfortably inconsistent about denouncing the terrible effects of the current standardized testing fad, on the one hand, but continuing to participate in that testing (and thereby helping to perpetuate it), on the other. The most powerful weapon against what Ted Sizer once called the “test ‘em until they bleed” approach to school reform is civil disobedience –*

that is, organized noncooperation. Perhaps sensing this, officials have relied on crude threats to discourage such resistance. For example, NCLB decrees that if participation in the testing falls below a certain level at a given school, that school will be labeled as failing, and punished. This effectively turns local school administrators into enforcers of an agenda about which they may harbor their own doubts.

The solution is to organize enough parents (or teachers) to take part in a mass boycott of the tests so that a critical mass is reached and it would be absurd for the government to punish all the participating schools or individuals, particularly when it's obvious that the low participation rate isn't due to apathy but to the very opposite: a collective act of conscience.

Article: It's called "Death to the Syllabus," it's by Mano Singham, it's focused primarily on higher education (but is relevant to high schools as well), it's available [HERE](#), and it begins as follows: "It is time to declare war on the traditional course syllabus. If there is one single artifact that pinpoints the degradation of liberal education, it is the rule-infested, punitive, controlling syllabus that is handed out to students on the first day of class. I have seen long and highly detailed syllabi that carefully lay out rules for attendance, punctuality, extra credit, grades, and penalties for missing deadlines, as well as detailed writing assignment requirements that specify page and word length, spacing, margins, and even font style and size. The syllabi use boldface, underlining, italics, and exclamation points for added emphasis; the net effect is that of the teacher yelling at the student. What such syllabi often omit is any mention of learning."

Website: ExcellenceWithoutAP.org [subsequently renamed IndependentCurriculum.org] lists dozens of prestigious high schools that have eliminated all Advanced Placement courses. The trick to figuring out why that move makes sense is to

realize that harder isn't the same thing as better. The most "rigorous" courses are often dreadful – and that's particularly true when those courses exist not to enhance students' understanding or enthusiasm about learning but merely to prepare them for an exam.

Quotation: *"If there had been even an ounce of genuine concern over American schools in three decades of federal goals-oriented policy intended to fix public education, past presidents and other high-ranking officials might have asked educators to be involved in the search for solutions. But beyond involving teachers in the preparation of standards, educators have been left out of virtually all decision making. Look at the selection of presidential appointees to the office of secretary of education since Reagan took office. It is impossible to look at that list and say, with a straight face, that there was even a little presidential concern for the state of public education in America. Had there been such a concern, educators of world renown would have occupied that office. John Goodlad would have been there, and James Comer, TheodoreSizer, Nel Noddings; the list of highly qualified individuals could go on."*

– Paul G. Theobald, "Elevating Education's Public Purpose," in Education and the Making of a Democratic People, ed. by John I. Goodlad, Roger Soder, and Bonnie McDaniel (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2008)

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