

# Remember When We Had High Standards? Neither Do I (##)

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## Remember When We Had Higher Standards? Neither Do I

By Alfie Kohn

*“In recent years, parents have cried in dismay that their children could not read out loud, could not spell, could not write clearly,” while “employers have said that mechanics could not read simple directions. Many a college has blamed high schools for passing on students...who could not read adequately to study college subjects; high schools have had to give remedial reading instruction to boys and girls who did not learn to read properly in elementary schools...”*

*On and on goes the devastating indictment of our education system. Or – well, perhaps I shouldn't say “our” education system, since few of us had much to say about school policy when this article appeared...in 1954.*

*Similar jeremiads were published, of course, in the 1980s (see especially the Reagan Administration's influential and deeply dishonest “Nation at Risk” report) and in the 1970s, but one could argue that those, like today's denunciations of falling standards and demands for accountability, reflect the same legacy of multiculturalism, radical education professors, and the post-Woodstock cultural realignment that brought down traditional values inside and outside of*

*schools.*

*But how does one defend such an argument when it turns out that people were saying exactly the same things about America's dysfunctional education system before Vietnam, before Civil Rights, before feminism – and displaying that same aggressive nostalgia for an earlier era when, you know, excellence really mattered?*

*And if pundits were throwing up their hands during the Eisenhower era about schools on the decline, about students who could barely read and write, about how we're being beaten by [insert name of other country here], the obvious question is: When exactly was that golden period that was distinguished by high standards?*

*The answer, of course, is that it never existed. "The story of declining school quality across the twentieth century is, for the most part, a fable," says social scientist Richard Rothstein, whose book *The Way We Were?* cites a series of similar attacks on American education, moving backward one decade at a time. Each generation invokes the good old days, during which, we discover, people had been doing exactly the same thing. ("Grade inflation" is a case in point: Harvard professors were already grumbling about how A's were "given too readily" back in 1894, only a few years after letter grades were introduced to the college.)*

*Of course, this phenomenon isn't limited to schooling. As I've described elsewhere, claims that parents are too permissive, that they fail to set limits, and consequently that "kids today" are spoiled and self-centered, can be found in articles and books that date back decades, if not centuries.*

*To dig up strikingly familiar observations or sentiments offered by people long dead isn't just an amusing rhetorical flourish. These echoes deprive us of the myth of uniqueness,*

*and that can be usefully unsettling. Whenever we're apt to sound off about how contemporary education – or any other aspect of modern life – is unprecedented in its capacity to give offense, the knowledge that our grandparents or distant ancestors said much the same thing, give or take a superficial detail, serves to remind us of an observation once offered by Adrienne Rich: "Nostalgia is only amnesia turned around."*

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