

# Teachers Describe the Harms of Test-Driven School Reform

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By Alfie Kohn

*To understand the true impact of raise-the-bar, close-the-gap “school reform” – the type demanded by corporate executives, imposed by politicians of both parties, and celebrated by pundits – you need to hear from the people who spend their days in real classrooms. Never mind that no credible evidence has ever shown that children benefit from high-stakes testing, merit pay, national standards, school takeovers, and the like. The absence of improvement wouldn’t be so bad. What’s intolerable is the substantial harm this approach has caused, a reality to which self-styled reformers seem oblivious.*

*The following comments from teachers, which are used here by permission, were sent unsolicited to our website just during the last few weeks. They’re representative of many, many more in the same vein that have been arriving on a regular basis for a decade now. These teachers are barely hanging on, while untold numbers of their colleagues have already thrown in the towel. From all indications, these are among the most talented and dedicated people in the field. Ominously, they are often replaced by the kind of teachers who obediently*

*teach what (and in the manner) they're told, who may even take comfort from scripted instruction, and, like so many noneducators, tend to confuse high test scores with meaningful learning.*

*The damage of top-down, test-driven school reform is most severe in the inner cities, where very specific and uniform standards ("All fourth graders will ...") have done the most to lower standards, and where NCLB has left the greatest number of children behind. We can expect even more bottom-level teaching as a result of Obama and Duncan's Race to the Top initiative.*

*But let's hear from the teachers themselves:*

*I have been teaching for 20 years in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. During that time, I have honed my craft, embraced the art of teaching and shown many urban children that there is a whole world out there to discover and embrace—a world beyond their neighborhoods and city. I have loved teaching and could never imagine myself without students in front of me.*

*The past three years, however, have been a nightmare of epic proportions. As we struggle to meet our "Average Yearly Progress" on the Pennsylvania State System of Assessment, we have, as a District, implemented a managed curriculum that has completely robbed teachers of the ability to practice the art of teaching. The "art" of teaching has instead been replaced by simply being able to deliver facts and formulas that will allow students to better perform. While this may garner us the coveted AYP, it has also had the chilling effect of seeing many of our children lose a sense of self that arts, electives, historic literature and project-based instruction allowed them. Yes, our scores on the PSSAs have gone up, but at what cost? We turn out students who can write an essay but fail to see the beauty in a Renoir or the emotional impact*

*of a Civil War love letter. We have students who, like automatons, can add, subtract and multiply, but will never feel the personal sense of satisfaction and fulfillment after offering voluntary community service—students who will never know the emotional impact of the opera or the symphony. Students to whom I will never be given the opportunity to impart my love of Antigone or Beowulf.*

*I can't imagine enduring ten more years of this in education.*

*– Pennsylvania teacher, 11/09*

*I am a 5th grade teacher in the western suburbs of Chicago. My district recently purchased the new Pearson/Scott Foresman Reading Street program. We formally administer tests every 6 weeks now in preparation for the ISATS, published by [another] Pearson company. Test scores are all that matter [in my district]. This school year, we will give our students... roughly 20 tests over the course of the year mandated by the district or state. The [reading] tests are so bad we had our district literacy coordinator take one, and she got a B because she simply had to guess at so many answers due to the tricky nature of the test.*

*The madness is growing. Please tell me it will stop. What is the best way to get people of influence to understand that now is the perfect time for a district to be progressive and show policy makers (almost all non-educators) what true learning should look like?*

*My love for teaching is sinking like the stock market.*

*– Illinois teacher, 11/09*

*As a "school in improvement," we are under attack from the feds, the state, and sadly, our own superintendent and curriculum director.*

*We are a great school. Many of us bring our own children (and nieces and nephews) here. 80% of our children live in poverty. 30% are [English Language Learners]. We provide a precious gem of a school for them. Every teacher has an excellent and extensive classroom library. We have amassed a book room containing hundreds of sets of multiple copies of great literature and emergent readers. Teachers focus on individual interests, strengths and needs. We work hard to provide quality experiences in science and the arts. We have a long-running book club.*

*We are being told to teach the basal with fidelity. We are hammered with test scores constantly and often publicly. We have been told to "Work harder. A two year gap in kindergarten can be closed in three months with good instruction." and "Poverty is a bad word. You should have to put a quarter in a jar every time you use it." Any discussion is ended by putting our test scores on the overhead and saying, "Here is the data."*

*I have spent 20 years honing my craft. I love this work. I hate to see all our efforts go down in flames. What will happen to the children without us? Our staff is attempting to fight back. But they look pretty dispirited. Our school is losing its glow.*

*My question is: How do we fight back effectively?*

*– Oregon teacher, 11/09*

*For strategies and resources to answer this last teacher's question, please see the links on our [Standards & Testing page](#) as well as these [brief comments](#) from teachers who have simply refused to participate in standardized testing.*

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