

Teachers Who Refuse to Hand Out the Tests

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By Alfie Kohn

What if they gave a test and nobody came? Or what if all the students came, but the teachers refused to give them a test? The civil rights movement succeeded not only because good laws were eventually passed (mandating desegregation) but because ordinary people refused to obey bad laws. Rather than just complaining about policies they thought were immoral, they withheld their consent through disciplined disobedience.

In May, virtually the entire eighth grade at a South Bronx, NY middle school handed in blank sheets of paper rather than take yet another practice exam for the state test – along with a petition that protested the “constant, excessive and stressful testing” that comes at the expense of “valuable instructional time with our teachers.” In California, activists are currently working to convince parents to boycott that state’s endless STAR testing program. “We have written and read and talked for years about the damage tests are doing to our children, our teachers, our schools and our democracy,” their website says. Now “it’s time to act.”

There have been other examples of protests by parents and

students – from Scarsdale to San Antonio – but let's take a moment to honor the people who have put their jobs on the line to say no: teachers who have stood up alone in their communities and said they just can't in good conscience participate in – and thereby perpetuate – this suffocating regimen of testing. When the history of the current "accountability" fad in education is written, these teachers will be likened to the folks who bravely challenged Jim Crow laws in the South.

"My conscience bothered me. I thought, 'How can I continue to do something I think is harmful for my students?' I simply had to stop giving the [state test]."

– Carl Chew, Washington teacher

"They've taken my job away from me as long as I have to spend my time teaching to the test. I can't do that anymore. So I have nothing to lose [by refusing to participate in the testing]."

– Jim Bougas, Massachusetts teacher

"Every single time I administer these tests, children are upset. I felt this year that I had three options, since continuing with this practice was not an option. I should either (a) spend a lot of time teaching my students about tests to try to lessen the stress, or (b) tell them exactly what to write down for every question, or (c) stand up for what I believe in and risk discipline, while protecting my students from this nonsense. . . . [In choosing (c), I'm] attempting to represent the views of so many of us who feel helpless in this horrible, spiraling descent of our education system."

– Kathryn Sihota, British Columbia teacher

"I have to look at myself in the mirror, and I know these tests are wrong. Frankly, I'm not a teacher when I teach to a

test like this [or] when I administer a test like this."

– Don Perl, Colorado teacher

"Someone needs to use a little common sense and say, 'I am just not going to do it.'"

– Doug Ward, North Carolina teacher

"How can I teach my kids to stand up for what they believe in if I'm not doing that myself?"

– Katie Hogan, 1 of 12 boycotters at a Chicago school

When Thoreau was imprisoned for refusing to pay war taxes, the jail faced the street. One day, his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson was walking by and said, "Henry! What are you doing in there?" To which Thoreau replied, "The question is what are you doing out there?" For any teacher who shares the outrage and grief felt by these dissenters, the challenge is to explain why he or she is helping to perpetuate that policy by breaking the shrink wrap and handing out the tests to students – in short, by following orders that he or she knows are wrong.

Of course we applaud the courage of educators who have taken a stand against this insanity. But what will it take for us to summon our own courage and join them?

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