

# What Student Test-Takers Share with Ejected Airline Passengers

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By Alfie Kohn

Social media exploded in early April after a video was posted of a doctor being dragged off a United flight for which he had a ticket. The outrage continued to build for days not just because we could watch what this man experienced but because the incident stirred up long-simmering resentment over how airlines treat most of their passengers every day.

Some years ago, I was on a United flight during which we passengers were handed evaluation forms and pencils. (This was long before feedback fatigue had set in for most of us, which is to say, before the days when every purchase at a store, every phone call to an 800 number, and every visit to a commercial website automatically triggered a request to take a survey.) I picked up the form, took a look at the questions, and then crumpled it up. Rather than asking, "Was your experience with making a reservation (or boarding the airplane) excellent, good, acceptable, unsatisfactory, or appalling?", it asked in each case, "Was your experience with United better than, about the same as, or worse than your experience on other airlines?"

I immediately realized that United didn't give a rat's ass about excellence or customer satisfaction. Its executives just wanted to make sure they weren't regarded as appreciably worse than their competitors. As long as every airline treated its passengers like garbage – left them hanging on hold for 45 minutes when they called, squeezed them into spaces intended for heavily medicated petite people, charged extra for everything except oxygen, and dragged occasional hapless passengers off the plane because the company sold more seats than were available – well, then, United was satisfied.

Fewer airlines exist today than when I balled up that pseudo-survey: United has merged with Continental, Delta with Northwest, American with U.S. Airways, Southwest with AirTran. Corporate concentration means, among other things, that it's less likely another company will make the one whose services you've paid for look bad. The result is customers who might as well holler: "I'm mad as hell, and I'm going to continue taking it!"

But United's survey mostly underscored the difference between doing well and merely doing better than others – or, if you prefer, between quality and victory. Which leads me to education.

Consider the sport of ranking the U.S. against other nations on standardized exams. Even if these tests were meaningful indicators of intellectual proficiency, which is doubtful, specifying how well one country's students perform relative to those elsewhere tells us nothing of interest. If all countries did reasonably well in absolute terms, there would be no shame in (and, perhaps, no statistical significance to) being at the bottom. If all countries did poorly, there would be no glory in being at the top. Exclamatory headlines about how "our" schools are doing compared to "theirs" suggest that we're less concerned with the quality of education than with whether we can chant, "We're Number One!"

The same is true when states, schools, or individual students are compared. A norm-referenced exam like the Iowa Assessments or the Stanford Achievement Test isn't designed to tell us how well the test-takers (or their teachers) are doing. It's designed to tell us how

each test-taker compares to all the other test-takers. So no matter how well or poorly they were taught, no matter how difficult the questions, exactly 10 percent of the students (or schools) will always score in the top 10 percent. And exactly half will fall below the median and look like failures. Always.

When you think about it, all standardized tests – not just those that are norm-referenced – are based on this compulsion to compare. If we were interested in educational excellence, we could use authentic forms of assessment that are based on students' performance at a variety of classroom projects over time. The only reason to *standardize* the process, to give all kids the same questions under the same conditions on a contrived, one-shot, high-stakes test, is if what we wanted to know wasn't "How well are they learning?" but "Who's beating whom?"

Of course, many other aspects of schooling similarly set students against one another, from spelling bees to awards assemblies to science "fairs" and music "festivals" that are really contests. Or consider those educators, particularly in the arts, whose professional pride is invested in the occasional graduate who goes on to distinguish herself as a well-known novelist or violinist. Trying to help as many students as possible cultivate a love of, and some competence at, one's field is an entirely different endeavor than trying to sift through hundreds of students in search of the very few who will later make it big. The latter suggests a profoundly antidemocratic sensibility, one that sees education as being about winnowing and selecting rather than providing something of value for everyone.

A system primarily designed to answer the question "Who's beating whom?" also reflects a deeply conservative premise: namely, that success is necessarily a scarce commodity. That's why it's not enough to achieve; one must triumph over others. If excellence is, by definition, something that everyone can't attain, then an activity in which people *aren't* sorted into winners and losers can be construed as an example of how we've lowered our standards. If "too many" students get good marks – even at a very selective institution – that's

considered evidence of “grade inflation”: We’re sanctioning mediocrity! This scarcity mentality is at the core of the American ethos: It decrees that *there must always be losers*.

Granted, United Airlines had a more practical reason for thinking in comparative terms. Their mission isn’t to make passengers happy; it’s to maximize shareholder value. The ultimate focus isn’t on their customers or workers but on their owners. It’s rational for them to spend the minimum time and money on their passengers so as to create no more unhappiness than what they’d experience on other airlines. (Or to divide up the airports with other carriers, so if passengers have to fly through Newark, Denver, Washington Dulles, Cleveland, or Houston, they have no choice but to travel on United, no matter how miserable they are.)

Perhaps it’s inherent to an economic system based on competition – one oriented toward private profit rather than the common good – that some folks will always be, so to speak, dragged off the plane. The question for educators is whether we’ll allow education to be framed by that same ideology. Are we about victory for some or learning for all?

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