

The Case Against “Tougher Standards”

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By Alfie Kohn

People who talk about educational “standards” use the term in different ways. Sometimes they’re referring to guidelines for teaching, the implication being that we should change the nature of instruction – a horizontal shift, if you will. (In the case of the standards drafted by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics [NCTM] in 1989, for example, the idea was to shift away from isolated facts and memorized procedures and toward conceptual understanding and problem solving.)

By contrast, when you hear someone say that we need to “raise standards,” that represents a vertical shift, a claim that students ought to know more, do more, perform better. This can get confusing because discussions about standards sometimes are limited to only one of these meanings, sometimes flip-flop between them, and sometimes involve an implicit appeal to one in order to press for the other. Our concern here is primarily with the second category; we’re not proposing that there shouldn’t be any guidelines for what goes on in classrooms or that our current approaches shouldn’t be changed. (One look at the “bunch o’ facts” model of instruction in a traditional classroom and the need for new standards – horizontal movement – becomes painfully clear.)

Even the idea of vertical movement seems hard to argue with, at least in the abstract. Don’t we want schools to be of high quality, and students to be able to do many things well? Of course. But the current demand for Tougher Standards carries with it a bundle of assumptions about the proper role of schools, the nature and causes of failure, and the way students learn. That’s why a number of people (mostly educators) have come to view with growing alarm what is now the dominant model of school reform.

People from parents to Presidents have begun to sound like a cranky, ill-informed radio talk-show host, with the result that almost anything can be done to students and to schools, no matter how ill-considered, as long as it is done in the name of “raising standards” or “accountability.” One is reminded of how a number of politicians, faced with the perception of high crime rates, resort to a get-tough, lock-’em-up, law-and-order mentality. This response plays well with the public, but is based on an exaggeration of the problem, a misanalysis of its causes, and a simplistic prescription that frequently ends up doing more harm than good.

So too with demanding Tougher Standards in education. Back in 1959, John Holt wrote that the main effect “of the drive for so-called higher standards in schools is that the children are too busy to think.” Today, it is almost impossible to distinguish Democrats from Republicans on this set of issues – only those with some understanding of how children learn from those who haven’t a clue. The disagreement that plays itself out in boards of education and state legislatures is pretty much limited to a clash between, on one side, the champions of Tougher Standards (a constituency that includes virtually all corporate groups, the President and the Governors, the leadership of the American Federation of Teachers, and most reporters who write about education); and, on the other side, those on the extreme right wing whose suspicion of anything involving the federal government leads them to oppose national standards or testing. (They, too, tend to endorse the idea of Tougher Standards, but insist on local control.) That’s pretty much the extent of the public debate on the subject. Left out almost entirely is the point of view of the students themselves, and the impact on their learning.

The result is that, from California to New York, from Michigan to Texas, from Virginia to Colorado, the kind of teaching that helps students understand ideas from the inside out – and that sustains their interest in understanding – is under siege. One story can stand in for thousands: Not long ago, a widely respected middle-school teacher in Wisconsin, famous for helping students design their own innovative learning projects, stood up at a community meeting and announced that he “used to be” a good teacher. The auditorium fell silent at his use of the past tense. These days, he explained, he just handed out textbooks and quizzed his students on what they had memorized. The reason was very simple. He and his colleagues were increasingly being held accountable for raising test scores. The kind of wide-ranging and enthusiastic exploration of ideas that once characterized his classroom could no longer survive when the emphasis was on preparing students to take a standardized examination. The purveyors of Tougher Standards had won, and therefore the students had lost.

Five Fatal Flaws

The Tougher Standards movement is fatally flawed in five separate ways.

- 1. It gets motivation wrong.** Most talk of standards assumes that students ought to be thinking constantly about improving their performance. This single-minded concern with results turns out to be remarkably simplistic. The assumption that achievement is all that counts overlooks a substantial body of psychological research suggesting that a focus on how well one is doing is very different from a focus on WHAT one is doing. Moreover, a preoccupation with performance often undermines interest in learning, quality of learning, and a desire to be challenged. (For more on this point, see “The Costs of Overemphasizing Achievement.”)
- 2. It gets pedagogy wrong.** The Tougher Standards contingent is big on back-to-basics, and, more generally, the sort of instruction that treats kids as though they were inert objects, that prepares a concoction called “basic skills” or “core knowledge” and then tries to pour it down their throats. State standards documents, in particular, typically contain long lists of specific facts and skills that all students in a given grade level are expected to master. This is a model that might be described as outdated were it not for the fact that, frankly, there never was a time when it worked all that well. Modern cognitive science just explains more systematically why it has always come up short. (For more on this point, see “Beware of the Standards, Not Just the Tests.”)
- 3. It gets evaluation wrong.** In practice, “excellence,” “higher standards,” and “raising the bar” all refer to scores on standardized tests, many of them multiple-choice, norm-referenced, and otherwise flawed. Indeed, much of the discussion about education today is arrested at the level of “Test scores are low; make them go up.” All the limits of, and problems with, such testing amount to a serious indictment of the version of school reform that relies on these tests. (For more on this point, see “Standardized Testing and Its Victims” and other articles.)
- 4. It gets school reform wrong.** Proponents of Tougher Standards have a proclivity for trying to coerce improvement by specifying exactly what must be taught and learned – that is, by mandating a particular kind of education. There is good reason to doubt that the way one changes schooling is simply by demanding that teachers and students do things differently. “Accountability” usually turns out to be a code for tighter control over what happens in classrooms by people who are not in classrooms – and it has approximately the same effect on learning that a noose has on breathing.
- 5. It gets improvement wrong.** Weaving its way through all these ideas is an implicit assumption about “rigor” and “challenge” – namely, that harder is always better. The reductive (and really rather silly) idea that tests, texts, and teachers can all be judged on the single criterion of difficulty level lurks behind complaints about “dumbing down” education and strident calls to “raise the bar.” Its first cousin is the idea that if something isn’t working very well – say, requiring students to do homework of dubious value – then insisting on more of the same will surely solve the problem. As Harvey Daniels puts it, the dominant philosophy of fixing schools today consists of saying, in effect, that “what we’re doing is OK, we just need to do it harder, longer, stronger, louder, meaner, and we’ll have a better country.” (For more on this point, see “Confusing Harder with Better.”)

Each of these five problems is also discussed at greater length in *The Schools Our Children Deserve*. Any one of them would be enough to raise serious questions about the call for Tougher Standards. Together, they suggest a threat of such dimensions that the only reasonable question for conscientious educators and parents is how we can most effectively change directions.

*A WORD ABOUT “NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND”

...We must quit confining our complaints about NCLB to peripheral problems of implementation or funding. Too many people give the impression that there would be nothing to object to if only their own school had been certified as making adequate progress, or if only Washington were more generous in paying for this assault on local autonomy. We have got to stop prefacing our objections by saying that, while the execution of this legislation is faulty, we agree with its laudable objectives. No. What we agree with is some of the rhetoric used to sell it, invocations of ideals like excellence and fairness. NCLB is not a step in the right direction. It is a deeply damaging, mostly ill-intentioned law, and no one genuinely committed to improving public schools (or to advancing the interests of those who have suffered from decades of neglect and oppression) would want to have anything to do with it.

Ultimately, we must decide whether we will obediently play our assigned role in helping to punish children and teachers. Every in-service session, every article, every memo from the central office that offers what amounts to an instruction manual for capitulation slides us further in the wrong direction until finally we become a nation at risk of abandoning public education altogether. Rather than scrambling to comply with its provisions, our obligation is to figure out how best to resist.

from “Test Today, Privatize Tomorrow,” April 2004

“NCLB widens the gap between the races more than any piece of educational legislation I’ve seen in 40 years. . . . [Its] gains aren’t learning gains, they’re testing gains. That’s why they don’t last.”

—Jonathan Kozol, 2007

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