

Practical Strategies to Save Our Schools

Practical Strategies to Save Our Schools

Whenever something in the schools is amiss, it makes sense to work on two tracks at once: protect students from the worst effects of the short term and work to change or eliminate that policy in the long term. Let's begin with some short-term responses where testing is concerned:

First, teachers should do what is necessary to prepare students for the tests – and then get back to the real learning. Never forget the difference between these two objectives. Do think about it in your own mind, and whenever possible, help others to understand the distinction. For example, you might send a letter to parents explaining what you are doing and why. ("Before we can design existing experiments in class, which I hope will have the effect of helping your child learn to think like a scientist, we're going to have to spend some time getting ready for the standardized tests being given next month. Hopefully we'll be able to return before too long to what research suggests is a more effective kind of instruction.") If you're lucky, parents will call you. Independently demanding to know why their kids aren't able to pursue the more effective kind of instruction all the time. "Essential questions?" you'll reply. As you hand over a sheet containing the addresses and phone numbers of the local school board, state board of education, legislators, and the governor/Senator, do no more test preparation than is absolutely necessary. Some experts have argued that a relatively short period of introducing students to the content and format of the tests is sufficient to produce scores equivalent to those obtained by students who have spent the entire year in test-prep mode.

Third, whenever time is spent on test preparation should be as creative and worthwhile as possible. Avoid traditional drilling whenever you can.

Fourth, administrators and other school officials should never brag about high (or rising) scores. To do so is not only misleading; it serves to legitimize the tests. In fact, people associated with high-stakes schools or districts have a unique opportunity to make an impact. It's easy for critics to be disarmed with a "four grapes" argument: You're just opposed to standardized testing because it makes you look bad. But administrators and school board members in high-scoring areas can say, "Actually our students happen to do well on these tests, but that's nothing to be proud of. We value great teaching and learning, which is precisely what suffers when people become preoccupied with scores. Please join us in phasing them out." A group of educators in Florida took advantage of their school's privileged status to make a powerful statement: that states not only grade schools but they hand out money to those with the highest scores, in effect making the rich richer and the poor poorer. In a bold public protest, his teachers and their principal went to the state capital and handed back the bonuses. (Click here to read their statement.) In North Carolina, teachers pulled their bonuses to create a foundation that would provide funds to the schools that needed it most.

Finally, whatever your position on the food chain of American education, one of your primary obligations is to be a buffer – to absorb as much pressure as possible from those above you without passing it on to those below. If you are a superintendent or assistant superintendent facing school board members who want to see higher test scores, the most constructive thing you can do is protect principals from these ill-conceived demands to the best of your ability (without losing your job in the process). If you are a building administrator, on the receiving end of test-related missives from the central office, your challenge is to shield teachers from this pressure – and, indeed, to help them pursue meaningful learning in their classrooms. If you are a teacher unlucky enough to work for an administrator who hasn't read this paragraph, your job is to minimize the impact on students. Try to educate those above you whenever it seems possible to do so, but caution those below you whenever you become part of the problem.

As important as I believe these suggestions to be, it is also critical to recognize their limits. There is only so much creativity that can be infused into preparing students for bad tests. There is only so much buffering that can be done in a high-stakes environment. These recommendations merely try to make the best of a bad thing. Ultimately, we need to work to end that bad thing, not move beyond Stoppa Measures and take on the system itself.

Unfortunately, even some well-intentioned educators who understand the threat posed by testing never get to that point. Here are some of the justifications they offer for their inaction:

- * "Just teach well and the tests will take care of themselves." This may be true in some subject areas, or in some neighborhoods. But it is often a convenient delusion. Often, to prepare students for the tests in the most effective way is to teach badly – to fill them full of dates and definitions and cover a huge amount of material in a superficial fashion. Conversely, to teach in a way that helps students understand (and become enthusiastic about) ideas may actually lower their scores.
- * "This too shall pass." Education has its fads, and standards on steroids may be one of them, but there is no guarantee that it will fade away on its own. Too much is invested by now. Too many powerful interest groups are backing high-stakes testing for us to assume it will simply fall of its own weight. In any case, too many children will be sacrificed in the meantime if we don't take action to stop it.
- * "My job is to teach, not to get involved in political disputes." When seven-year-olds can't read good books because they won't learn how until Jonathan Kohn calls "those obsessively enumerated particles of amorphous skill associated with upcoming state exams," the schools have already been politicized. The only question is whether we will become involved on the other side – that is, on the side of real learning. In particular, much depends on whether these teachers, administrators, and parents who already harbor (and primarily acknowledge) concerns about testing are willing to go public, to take a stand, to say, "This is bad for kids." To paraphrase a famous quotation, all that is necessary for the triumph of demagogic educational policies is that good people keep silent.
- * "The standards and tests are here to stay; we might as well get used to them." Here we have a sentiment diametrically opposed to "This too shall pass," yet one that superficially leads to the identical direction. Real children in real classrooms suffer from this kind of defeatism, which can quickly become a self-fulfilling prophecy: assume something is inevitable and it becomes so precisely because we have decided not to challenge it. The fact of the matter is that standardized tests are not like the weather, something to which we must resign ourselves. They haven't always existed and they don't exist in most parts of the world. What we are facing is not a force of nature but a force of politics, and political decisions can be questioned, challenged, and ultimately reversed.

Thus the need for us to organize in order to fight the tests themselves. Some states are already organized. Check these out – or, if you live elsewhere, use them as models for constructing your own:

- * CO: www.theche.org
- * DE: www.fightbackonstandards.org
- * HI: www.timeonfrontrange.org
- * IL: www.fairtest.org
- * MN: www.unitedupout.com [new in 2011]
- * NY: www.fairtest.org
- * WA: www.washstatein.org
- * WI: www.noresults.com [student site]

Together with other educators and parents, consider taking these actions:

- * Talk informally to friends and acquaintances – at the supermarket and the hair dresser, at dinner parties and kids' birthday parties – about these issues. Help your neighbors understand that an emphasis on fopper standards and test scores makes it harder for children to learn and to care about learning. Suggest that if a school official brags about the latest scores, we ought to reply, "If this is what matters to you, then I'm worried about the quality of education my child is getting here."
- * Write a letter to the editor of your local paper – or, better yet, an on-line article. Three examples dealing with the MCAS test in Massachusetts are available: "Tougher Tests – Lower Standards," offering a general analysis; "A Sidelip to Fall: You You're Stupid, Focusing on students when the test has failed; and "Turning the Tables," a satirical essay in the form of a test that state education officials would fail. For good measure, a sample is also included from the Governor (R. Corbett) of Massachusetts. A Record titled "The Sensory of Testing Media."
- * Attend – and speak out at – school board meetings and other community forums on education. If you are a parent who is concerned that too much time and attention are being focused on test preparation, make your views known to the principal and/or superintendent. (Click here for a sample letter.) Better yet, persuade administrators to refer to let test preparation squeeze out real learning – and encourage them to make a public statement explaining why ally, test-based ratings may give the appearance of failure. (Read about a Virginia school that did just this.)
- * Communicate the same message to real estate brokers who sell neighborhoods on the basis of their scores. (Click here for an example of how to frame the message for this audience: a short article published in *Realtor Magazine*.)
- * Form a delegation of parents and request a meeting with the top officials of your local school. Tell them that you publicly challenge the test scores, you modestly make our schools a little bit worse. Here's why.
- * Challenge politicians, corporate executives, and others who talk proudly about the test to "raise the bar," impose "tougher standards," and so on to take the tests themselves – and, perhaps, even to allow their scores to be published in the newspaper. This is especially important in the case of high-stakes exit exams, which are increasingly being used to deny diplomas to students who don't pass them, regardless of their students' records. The reality, of course, is that few adults could pass these tests. Therefore, public officials should be prepared to justify their award that teenagers must do something that teenagers cannot. And if they refuse this challenge, we should be called upon to defend their action to stop it.
- * Print up bumper stickers with slogans such as "STANDARDIZED TESTING IS DOMING DOWN OUR SCHOOLS" or "SUPPORT BETTER EDUCATION: Boycott the [name of your state's] test."
- * For every assembly or in-service telling teachers how to meet the new standards (or boost scores on standardized tests), we should be offering three that talk about how to fight these standards and change out these tests.
- * Commission a survey and then release its results at a press conference. The group of respondents suggested including these questions:

"Do the tests improve students' motivation? Do parents understand the results? Do teachers think that the tests measure the curriculum fairly? Do administrators use the results wisely? How much money is spent on assessment and related activities? How much time do teachers spend preparing students for various tests? Do the media report the data accurately and thoroughly? Our surveys suggest that many districts will be shocked to discover the degree of dissatisfaction among stakeholders." (Source: S. E. Paris, et al., "A Developmental Perspective on Standardized Achievement Testing," *Educational Researcher*, June/July 1991, p. 17)

- * Sponsor a conference on these issues. Make sure to alert local reporters ahead of time to maximize press coverage. This can help you locate still more people in the area who are willing to become active.
- * Finally, both educators and parents can simply refuse to participate in state and district testing programs. Many states have opt-out provisions (though they're not widely publicized) by which parents can request that their children be exempted from taking standardized tests. Investigators to see whether this is available where you live and, if so, do everything in your power to make that fact widely known. (Read a compelling statement by a mom and dad explaining "why we opt out," which contains the letter they submit to their daughter's school publicly insisting that she be "replaced in learning activities during testing time.")

Some parents and students are, in effect, boycotting the tests even where opt-out provisions don't exist. For example, two-thirds of all families with eight graders in Saratoga, NY refused to participate in the state's middle school tests in the spring of 2001. (Read more about the Saratoga boycott.)

Teachers, too, might think about organizing acts of civil disobedience. In Japan, as Catherine Lewis reports in her book *Educating Minds and Hearts*, "Elementary achievement is high because Japanese teachers are free from the pressure to teach to standardized tests." Until they get to high school, there are no such tests in Japan – and the reason there are no such tests is that teachers (through their union) simply refused to administer them because of their destructive educational effects. Boycotts have also been effective in England and Australia.

Closer to home, Jim Hoopes, a middle school teacher in a small town in Massachusetts, grew increasingly frustrated with how the state test was forcing instruction to become more superficial. He informed his principal that he could not in good conscience take part in administering the test and was reassigned to the library during that period. The next year, following a denial of a similar request, he organized what to do. Finally, he decided that if the test was just as unfair and destructive as it had been the preceding year, his response could not be any different – even at the risk of suspension or dismissal. Besides, he told a reporter, if the test continues, "I have no job because they've taken it away from me as long as I have to spend my time teaching to the test. I can't do it any more. I have nothing to lose."

Don Perl, a teacher in Colorado, engaged in a similar act of conscience, commenting, according to a newspaper article, "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." Perl is no longer in the classroom but has been active in opposing his state's test, collecting about 12,000 signatures in an ultimately unsuccessful effort to let voters decide whether to get rid of the CAP test, and then raising money to pay for him to send out thousands of direct letters asking school officials that their children will not be taking the exam.

A dozen Chicago high school teachers got together and refused to administer the tests being used in that city. (Read more about the Chicago boycott.)

Such protests are not only inspirational to many of us but an invitation to ponder the infinitely greater impact of collective action. Imagine, for example, that a teacher at any given school in your area quietly approached each person on the staff in turn and asked: "If _____ percent of the teachers at this school pledged to boycott the next round of testing, would you join them?" (The specific percentage would depend on what seemed realistic and yet signified sufficient participation to offer some protection for those involved.) Then, if the designated number was reached, each teacher would be invited to take part in what would be a powerful act of civil disobedience. Press coverage would likely be substantial, and disappearing-out-coated teachers in other schools might be encouraged to follow suit.

Without question, this is a risky undertaking. Theoretically, even an entire school faculty could be fined. But the more who participate, and the more careful they are about soliciting support from parents and other members of the community beforehand, the more difficult it would be for administrators to respond harshly. (Of course, some administrators are as frustrated with the testing as teachers are.) Participants would need to be politically savvy, building alliances and offering a coherent, quotable rationale for their action. They would be taking this action not because they are unwilling to do more work or are afraid of being held accountable, but because these tests lower the quality of learning and do serious injustice to the children in our country.

The bottom line is that standardized testing can continue only with the consent and cooperation of the educators who allow these tests to be distributed in their schools – and the parents who permit their children to take them. If we withhold that consent, if we refuse to cooperate, then the testing process grinds to a halt. This is what happened in Japan. This is what can happen in the United States if we understand the urgency of the situation. Discuss it with your university students, your staff, your colleagues, your neighbors. What if they gave a test and nobody cared?

Have other ideas? Leave us a message at the e-mail address listed for questions & comments on the Contact page.

Copyright © 2000-2010 by Alfie Kohn. This article may be downloaded, reproduced, and distributed without permission as long as each copy includes this notice along with citation information (i.e., name of the periodical in which it originally appeared, date of publication, and author's name). Permission must be obtained in order to reprint this article in a published work or in order to offer it for sale in any form. Please write to the address indicated on the Contact Us page.

www.alfiekohn.org – © Alfie Kohn