The Deadly Effects of “Tougher Standards” — (Lecture Topic)

THE DEADLY EFFECTS OF “TOUGHER STANDARDS”

“[The main effect] of the drive for so-called higher standards in schools is that the children are too busy to think,” said John Holt in 1959. Four decades later, policymakers are pursuing just such a heavy-handed, top-down version of education reform. The results: schools have been turned into giant test-prep centers, the intellectual life has been squeezed out of many classrooms, and some of the best educators have gotten tired (or fired).

This seminar, by the author of THE SCHOOLS OUR CHILDREN DESERVE, invites participants to explore five fatal flaws of the Tougher Standards movement:

1. **It gets motivation wrong.** Leading students to become preoccupied with how well they are doing in school can undermine their engagement with what they are doing. Paradoxically, a single-minded concern with results can reduce the quality of learning — along with the desire to explore ideas.

2. **It gets pedagogy wrong.** Standards are often defined as a long list of forgettable facts that students must know, or else. Moreover, teachers are encouraged to stick with the sort of traditional instruction that has now been shown by the best theory and research to interfere with deep understanding.
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.

4. **It gets school reform wrong.** Tougher Standards are usually seen not as guidelines but as mandates, with “accountability” a code word for tighter control over what happens in classrooms by people who are not in classrooms.

5. **It gets improvement wrong.** Weaving its way through all these ideas is the implicit assumption that harder is always better. The result is that tests, texts, and teaching have not become more rigorous but merely more onerous.

This workshop concludes by helping participants to see that the push for Tougher Standards is not a reality to be coped with but a political movement that can be opposed. Practical strategies are suggested by which educators can pursue a more thoughtful vision of teaching and learning.