Most educators, if asked, can explain the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation — between carrots and sticks on the one hand, and love of learning on the other. But many of our daily practices suggest that we fail to understand the importance of the distinction. In this workshop, Alfie Kohn, the author of PUNISHED BY REWARDS, shows why we need to stop asking “How motivated are my students?” and start asking “How are my students motivated?”

That question, in turn, leads to an even more surprising contrast: the distinction between getting students to think about their performance (that is, how well they are doing) and getting them to think about the learning itself (what they are doing). These orientations often pull in opposite directions, which means that too much emphasis on achievement can reduce students’ interest in learning — and cause them to avoid challenging tasks. When the point is to prove how smart you are, there is less inclination to engage deeply with ideas.

Thus, the problem with standardized testing is not only how bad the tests themselves are, but also how much attention is paid to the results. Even new, “authentic” assessments may
backfire if students are constantly led to ask, “How am I doing?” Likewise, research demonstrates that students who have come to focus on grades are likely to think less creatively and come to see learning as a chore. (“Do we have to know this?”)

This workshop urges teachers and administrators to reconsider basic assumptions about motivation in general and evaluation in particular. Participants are helped to develop strategies that tap children’s natural desire to explore ideas:

- creating a curriculum that is meaningful and relevant to students’ interests
- bringing students in on the process of making decisions about their learning
- transforming classrooms into caring communities where students feel safe and connected to others, and
- moving away from traditional grading in favor of more constructive and learner-centered approaches to feedback.

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