

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## Encouraging Educator Courage

By **Alfie Kohn**

Education research doesn't always get the respect it deserves, but let's be honest: There's already enough of it to help us decide what to do (or stop doing) on many critical issues. Likewise, there are plenty of examples of outstanding classrooms and schools in which that research is being put into practice. What's lacking is sufficient courage for those examples to be widely followed.

It pains me to say this, but professionals in our field often seem content to work within the constraints of traditional policies and accepted assumptions—even when they don't make sense. Conversely, too many educators seem to have lost their capacity to be outraged by outrageous things. Handed foolish and destructive mandates, they respond only by requesting guidance on how to implement them.

The Cowardly Lion was able to admit that he lacked what made the muskrat guard his musk. Cowardly humans are more likely just to change the subject. Propose something that makes a meaningful difference, and you'll hear, "But we've always ...," "But the parents will never ...," "But we can't be the only school in the area to ..."

What, then, do truly courageous educators do? They dig deeper, they take responsibility, and they share power.

**Digging deeper.** It requires gumption to follow one's principles wherever they lead. One may hope, for example, that children will be lifelong learners. But what if evidence and experience tell us that interest in learning declines when students are graded and made to work on academic assignments at home? Are we willing to question any traditional practices—including grades and homework—that interfere with important goals?

Advanced Placement courses often just accelerate the worst kind of lecture-based, textbook-oriented instruction. They're "rigorous," but that doesn't mean they're good. When it was reported that **Scarsdale High School in New York** joined other schools in deciding to drop all AP courses, an administrator at a nearby school circulated the article to his colleagues under the heading "Do we have the guts?"

To dig deeper is to ask the root questions: not how *many* AP courses kids should take, but whether to replace the College Board's curriculum with our own; not how *much* homework to assign, but why kids should have to work a second shift every evening; not *how* to grade, but whether to do so at all.

Even when practices seem to be producing good results, a courageous educator questions the criteria: "Wait a minute—we say this policy 'works,' but doesn't that just mean it raises scores on bad tests?" "My classroom may be quiet and orderly, but am I promoting intellectual and moral development, or merely compliance?" "Aren't our graduates getting into prestigious colleges mostly because they're from affluent families? Are we helping them become deep and passionate thinkers?"



—Robbie Lawrence

**Taking responsibility.** The path of least resistance is to attribute problems to those who have less power than you. It's much harder to respond the way a [San Diego teacher did](#) (when she wrote several years ago in these pages): "If a child starts to act up, I ask myself: 'How have I failed this child? What is it about this lesson that is leaving her outside the learning? How can I adapt my plan to engage this child?' I stopped blaming my children."

We have to be willing to fight for what's right even in the face of concerted opposition. [Maureen Downey, a reporter for \*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution\*](#), wrote several years ago about how tough that can be in a culture where those "who speak up when they believe their students' welfare is at stake, and who question the system, earn the label of troublemaker." Lots of principals, she added, are "too cowed to practice 'creative insubordination.' "

**Parting with power.** It takes guts, not just talent, for a teacher to lead students beyond a predictable search for right answers—and to let them play an active role in the quest for meaning that replaces it. That entails not only accepting some unpredictability and messiness but also giving up some control.

A teacher in Washington state was proud of herself for having posted this sign at the front of her classroom: "Think for yourself; the teacher might be wrong!" But gradually she realized that her classroom wasn't really learner-centered. "I wanted [students] to think for themselves," she confessed in a journal article, "but only so long as their thinking didn't slow down my predetermined lesson plan or get in the way of my teacher-led activity or argue against my classroom policies." It takes courage to admit one hasn't gone as far as one thought.

I've met teachers who took a deep breath and let kids choose their own final grades, who tried out a no-homework policy to see what would happen, who stopped decorating the classroom by themselves and instead invited the kids to decide collectively how they wanted their classroom to look.

I've also met administrators who facilitated democratic decisionmaking among the staff instead of merely trying to get "buy in" to decisions they'd already made, who invited teachers to run faculty meetings on a rotating basis rather than controlling all the meetings themselves, who suddenly realized that much of their airy talk about "responsibility," "citizenship," "character," and "motivation" really just amounted to euphemisms for obedience.

These days, the greatest barrier to meaningful learning is the standards-and-testing juggernaut—top-down, corporate-style mandates that are squeezing the life out of classrooms. This, therefore, is where courage may be needed most desperately. I'm heartened by teachers—most recently in Seattle, but before them in Colorado, Massachusetts, and Illinois—who have refused on principle to administer standardized tests. ("How can I teach my kids to stand up for what they believe in if I'm not doing that myself?" asked one Chicago test boycotter.) And by the Michigan high school teachers who rejected the reductive focus on numerical "data" in the standard version of "professional learning communities" in favor of a teacher-designed initiative to focus on what students need. And by hundreds of Florida teachers who returned their bonus checks for having produced high test scores. And by the New York superintendent who told me "it's time for civil disobedience"—and then worked to create an alternative diploma that wouldn't be based on high-stakes tests.

**"Too many educators seem to have lost their capacity to be outraged by outrageous things."**

I understand how real fear keeps more of us from doing what we know should be done. I don't want to blame the victims, or minimize the culpability of those who pass bad laws. But if every educator who understood the damage done by those policies decided to speak out, to organize, to resist, then the policies would soon collapse of their own weight. Many teachers and administrators debate whether to do so, or struggle with whether to respond to students' interests rather than conform to prescriptive state (or national) standards. They know the risks, but they also realize that Jonathan Kozol was right: "Abject capitulation to unconscionable dictates from incompetent or insecure superiors can be contagious."

It takes courage to stand up to absurdity when all around you people remain comfortably seated. But if we need one more reason to do the right thing, consider this: The kids are watching us, deciding how to live their lives in part by how we've chosen to live ours.

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