

Schools would be great if it weren't for the kids

This was written by [Alfie Kohn](#), the author of 12 books about education and human behavior, including "The Schools Our Children Deserve," "The Homework Myth," and the forthcoming "Feel-Bad Education . . . And Other Contrarian Essays on Children & Schooling." He lives (actually) in the Boston area and (virtually) at www.alfiejohn.com.

By Alfie Kohn

Robert J. Samuelson, an economics writer, [published a column about school reform](#) in The Washington Post and Newsweek earlier this month that had me imagining a conversation as it would play out in a sitcom.

We hear Samuelson saying, "Few subjects inspire more intellectual dishonesty and political puffery than 'school reform.'" Then we cut to his listener, smiling broadly and nodding rapidly, overcome with relief that someone in the mass media finally gets it.

Samuelson continues: It simply doesn't make sense to try to "purge 'ineffective' teachers and principals." His listener, almost giddy with gratitude now, prepares to chime in, as Samuelson, without pausing, delivers the punch line: That's right, it's time to stop blaming teachers and start . . . blaming students!

And in the classic comedic style of delayed response, his listener responds, "Exactly! It's --. Wait. *What?!*" as the smile is replaced by a look of dismay and incredulity. CUE: laugh track.

But Samuelson isn't kidding. In fact, he casts himself in the role of brave truth teller, describing as "almost unmentionable" his appraisal that those pesky students can't seem to summon the motivation to work harder -- as if criticizing students were a taboo in our society rather than one of our favorite pastimes.

Blaming students is the next logical step after blaming teachers. In fact, the two reflect the same general perspective on education, one in which commentators look down from their aeries and inform us that the trouble lies with the people in the classrooms rather than with the policies imposed on them.

The solution consists of some combination of carrots and sticks: When they don't perform up to expectations, we hurt the teachers (by publicly humiliating or firing them) or the students (by forcing them to repeat a grade or denying them a diploma). Or we try to buy compliance by dangling money in front of teachers (with some form of merit pay) or students (with rewards for good grades or high scores). It's all of a piece, really.

But Samuelson has even more in common with other proponents of today's version of school reform. His focus is not on students' achievements (the intellectual accomplishments of individual kids) but only on "student achievement" (the aggregate results of standardized tests).

The rest of Samuelson's argument about the problem of "meager progress," which is framed exclusively in terms of test scores, will hold little interest for anyone who understands just how misleading the results of those tests really are.

Look beyond methods, though, and consider goals. What's the point of educating students in the first place? Here is where it becomes relevant that Samuelson's primary area of interest, like that of so many others who hold forth on the subject of education, is not education. His job is to write about economics, and he sees schooling through that lens. As I've noted [elsewhere](#), we have reason to worry when schooling is discussed primarily in the context of "global competitiveness" rather than in terms of what children need or what contributes to a democratic culture -- and, indeed, when the children themselves are seen mostly as future workers who will someday do their part to increase the profitability of their employers. (No wonder New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman made approving mention of Samuelson's column.)

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Upon hearing someone castigate students for being insufficiently motivated, a noneconomist might be inclined to ask two questions. The

first is: "Motivated to do what, exactly"? Anything they're told, no matter how unengaging, inappropriate, or, well, demotivating?

Whenever I see students made to cram facts into their short-term memories for a test, practice a series of decontextualized skills on yet another worksheet, listen passively to a lecture, or inch their way through the insipid prose of a corporate-produced textbook, I find myself thinking of a comment made by [Frederick Herzberg](#), a critic of traditional workplace management: "Idleness, indifference, and irresponsibility," he said, "are healthy responses to absurd work."

The second question, informed by decades of progress in the field of psychology, is: "What *kind* of motivation are we talking about here?" There is a critical difference between intrinsic motivation, which refers to interest in the task itself, and extrinsic motivation, in which people's actions are driven by an inducement outside of the task, a reward or punishment.

It's not just that intrinsic and extrinsic are different. Nor is it just that they're unequal, with the former being far more powerful and enduring. The key point is that extrinsic motivators tend to *undermine* intrinsic motivation. The more you reward people for doing something, or for doing it well, the less interest they typically come to have in whatever they had to do to get the reward.

That's why the bribes and threats at the heart of current school "reform," like the use of positive reinforcement and punitive consequences in individual classrooms, are not just ineffective but counterproductive. (I've [reviewed](#) the copious supporting research, along with real-world examples, and of course so have [others before me](#).)

Economists, including those in the sexy subfield of behavioral economics, have a built-in blind spot to this distinction. They talk about "motivation" as if it came in only one flavor, as if the only question were how much (rather than what kind). They see every social problem as a challenge to get the incentives right, oblivious to the limits of that worldview and the inherent problems of employing *any* incentives (which is to say, manipulating people with extrinsic motivators). The kind of psychology in which economics is rooted is a rusty Skinnerian behaviorism that most psychologists outgrew long ago.

Thus, Samuelson tells us that students' motivation "comes from many sources: curiosity and ambition; parental expectations; the desire to get into a 'good' college; inspiring or intimidating teachers; peer pressure." Notice how he treats these as interchangeable, or at least as comparable instances of the same thing. To do so is to miss the qualitative differences between curiosity and most of those other factors, or between teachers who inspire and teachers who intimidate.

Samuelson continues: "Motivation is weak because more students . . . don't like school, don't work hard and don't do well." But *why* don't they like school (which is the key to understanding why, assuming his premise is correct, they don't succeed)? What has happened to their desire to figure out how things work, the hunger to make sense of things, with which all children start out?

Well, one thing that's happened is a concatenation of rewards and punishments, including grades, which teach students that learning is just a means to an end. Another thing that's happened is teaching that's meant primarily to raise test scores. And inner-city kids get the worst of the sort of schooling that's not about exploring and discovering and questioning but only about working hard (often at rote tasks) and being nice (read: obedient).

And so we find ourselves facing a painful paradox: People who blame students for not being "motivated" tend to think educational success means little more than higher scores on bad tests and they're apt to see education itself as a means to making sure our corporations will beat their corporations. The sort of schooling that results is the type almost guaranteed to . . . kill students' motivation.

What may look like simple apathy, laziness, or opposition on the part of kids often reflects a problem with what, and how, they're being taught, or the extent to which they've been excluded from the process of making

decisions about their own learning.

Conversely, if you want to see (intrinsically) motivated kids, you need to visit classrooms or schools that take a nontraditional approach to education, places where students are more likely to be absorbed and frequently delighted, where what they're doing is not merely "rigorous" (a word often applied to very difficult busywork) but meaningful.

Those who presume to weigh in on problems with education should visit schools that look very different from the ones that most of us attended -- and even more different from the chillingly militaristic places that rich white people cheerfully recommend for poor black children. Read Dewey, Piaget, Bruner, and Montessori.

Read the contemporary giants: Meier,Sizer, Goodlad. Read other educators who are thoughtful about what great classrooms look like and how to create them: Lilian Katz, Eleanor Duckworth, Constance Kamii, Harvey Daniels, Nancie Atwell, Jackie and Marty Brooks, Jim Beane, Steven Wolk, and many more.

In the meantime, inspired by Samuelson, I'm going to get to work on my next column, which will provide an analysis of how currency devaluation affects the trade deficit -- a subject I know absolutely nothing about.

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