

Alfie Kohn: We Have to Take Back Our Schools

By [Anthony Cody](#) on July 27, 2011

Alfie Kohn has been at the forefront of the resistance to test-based reforms for more than a decade. As we approach the [Save Our Schools March](#) this Saturday, I asked him to share some thoughts about the challenges we face.

When many of us point out the narrowing of the curriculum that has been the result of high stakes testing, we are told that the next generation of tests, which the Department of Education has invested \$350 million to develop, will be far better at measuring complex thinking. What do you think of this?

First, history alone should make us skeptical about the claim that DOE is going to reverse course; as far as I know, there's zero precedent for meaningful assessments sponsored -- or even encouraged -- by federal officials.

Second, the cast of characters currently in Washington makes that claim even less credible. Arne Duncan knows nothing about the nuances of assessment and he's surrounded by Gates Foundation people and others who are at the heart of the corporate "reform" movement that has actively supported the ultra-high-stakes use of lousy tests.

Third, any test that's standardized -- one-size-fits-all, created and imposed by distant authorities -- is inauthentic and is likely to measure what matters least. If these people were serious about assessing children's thinking, they would be supporting teachers in gathering information over time about the depth of understanding that's reflected in their projects and activities. Do the folks at DOE even realize that you don't need to test in order to assess?

Fourth, there's every indication that whatever assessments are created will continue to be the basis for rating and ranking, for bribes and threats. A high-stakes approach, in which you use your power to compel people below you to move in whatever direction you want is at the heart of the Bush-Obama-Gates sensibility (see NCLB, Race to the Top, etc.). And that will undermine any assessment they come up with. We saw that in Kentucky and Maryland a dozen years ago: "Accountability" systems destroyed performance-based assessments. It's sort of like the economic principle about currency known as Gresham's Law: Bad assessments will drive out good assessments in a high-stakes environment.

Much of your work has focused on student motivation. How do you see high stakes testing affecting students' motivation to learn?

There are two things going on here. First, literally scores of studies have shown that extrinsic inducements tend to undermine intrinsic motivation. The more you reward people for doing something (or threaten them for not doing it), the less interest they tend to have in whatever they were made to do. Dangle money or higher ratings in front of students -- or teachers -- for producing better results, and you may get better results temporarily, particularly if the measure is superficial. But their interest in doing it will likely decline, which means this controlling approach isn't just ineffective -- it's counterproductive.

Second, the problem isn't just with the (manipulative) method; it's with the goal. The high stakes here aren't designed to improve learning, at least in any meaningful sense of the word. They're designed to

improve test scores. Those are two completely different things, and they typically pull in opposite directions. Pressure people to raise scores, and the classroom will be turned into a test-prep center. Such an environment will likely make anyone's passion for learning (or teaching) evaporate.

How might we approach enhancing the motivation of teachers to teach well?

You can't "motivate" people other than yourself. You can make them do certain things by bribing or threatening them, but you can't make them want to do it. In fact, the more you rely on extrinsic inducements like merit pay or grades, the less interest they're likely to have in doing those things. What we can do is support teachers' intrinsic motivation by bringing them in on decision making, by working with them -- so they, in turn, will work with students -- to create a culture, a climate, a curriculum in which a passion for teaching and learning is nourished.

I wrote an article a few years ago called "The Folly of Merit Pay," and I ended it as follows: "So how should we reward teachers? We shouldn't. They're not pets. Rather, teachers should be paid well, freed from misguided mandates, treated with respect, and provided with the support they need to help their students become increasingly proficient and enthusiastic learners."

This week [John Merrow](#) said he hoped people would "go to the rally ready to argue for specific changes in schools -- not just 'holistic education' and the like, but specifics." How would you respond to his request?

Actually, "holistic" education -- along with other adjectives such as "progressive" or "learner-centered" or "constructivist" -- isn't just a vague slogan. It denotes very specific and, in my opinion, sensible and research-backed practices. Of course it takes awhile to explain what they are and why they make sense, so we'll always be at a disadvantage compared to people who speak in sound bites about "bold reform," "raising the bar," "accountability," "tougher standards," and so on. Those are the people we ought to be pushing for specifics: What exactly do you have in mind, pedagogically speaking, beyond bullying teachers and kids to get higher scores on bad tests?

In any case, those of us with a commitment to progressive education are protesting the outrageous policies being foisted on our schools precisely because they make it so difficult to do what makes sense for children. It's precisely because of our desire for meaningful teaching and learning (about which we can be as specific as you'd like) that we oppose the heavy-handed, top-down, test-driven, corporate-styled policies that get in the way.

Incidentally, when ordinary people took to the streets in Cairo and elsewhere in the Middle East, I wonder if John Merrow wagged his finger at them and piously advised them that they ought to have a fully formed plan for democratic government before protesting.

What do you think is the significance of the [Save Our Schools March](#)?

We are living through what future historians will surely describe as one of the darkest eras in American education -- a time when teachers, as well as the very idea of democratic public education, came under attack; when carrots and sticks tied to results on terrible tests were sold to the public as bold "reform"; when politicians who understand nothing about learning relied uncritically on corporate models and metaphors to set education policy; when the goal of schooling was as misconceived as the methods, framed not in terms of what children need but in terms of "global competitiveness" -- that is, how U.S. corporations can triumph over their counterparts in other countries.

There will come a time when people will look back at this era and ask, "How the hell could they have let this happen?" By participating in Saturday's march, by speaking out in our communities, we're saying that we need to act before we lose an entire generation to this insanity. The corporate-style school reformers don't have research or logic on their side. All they have is the power to impose their ignorance with the force of law. To challenge their power, therefore, means we need to organize. We must make sure that the conversation about the how's and why's of education is driven by educators.

In short, we have to take back our schools.

Alfie Kohn is the author of 12 books on education and human behavior, including *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, *Punished by Rewards*, *The Case Against Standardized Testing*, and, most recently, *Feel-Bad Education*.