

The Trouble With “Back-to-Basics” and “Tougher Standards”

By Alfie Kohn

How can we fix our failing schools? The question is heard frequently these days, but its premise is incorrect. Once we look beyond the scare headlines, we find that students in American schools are actually doing about as well as ever on standardized tests. A lot of people have ignored or misread those data in a politically motivated attempt to attack public education. On the other hand, things look a little different if we use measures that are more meaningful than standardized tests. Efforts to judge the richness and depth of children's understanding of ideas turn up a real problem. Even students who get good grades at good schools often can't explain what they're doing or think beyond what they've been trained to do. In that sense, one could agree that schools are failing, but in a very different way than is normally claimed, and for reasons that lead to a very different set of prescriptions.

For example, by the time they're in second or third grade, most children can "read," in the sense that they know how to pronounce words, but they don't always understand what they're reading. Most students can work the steps of a math problem, but they may lack a feel for the quantities involved; they can't really make sense of what they're doing or see its connection to real-life questions that involve numbers.

The people who claim (falsely) that test scores are dropping usually demand more emphasis on basic skills, more traditional instruction, more of the kind of teaching geared to raising test scores. But that's precisely the approach that caused the real problem in the first place—the failure to help kids become thinkers. The more we go "back to basics," the worse things get.

Thus, the notion that our schools have strayed from the old-fashioned teaching that used to be successful is dead wrong on two counts. First, old-fashioned methods weren't all that successful in the past either. It may not be easy for us to admit, but those methods caused countless people to give up on school and think of themselves as stupid. Even people who used to be successful students often don't show much depth of understanding, much capacity for critical reflection, or a lifelong love of learning.

Second, the evidence suggests that our schools haven't "strayed" much at all. They continue to be remarkably traditional, and the differences between then and now are mostly superficial. We used to copy down information from the World Book; our kids copy it down from the World Wide Web. It's the same model of learning, which treats kids like passive receptacles into which information is poured.

Furthermore, students in most schools are still given grades despite research showing that the more you get them to think about snagging A's or 100's, the more they lose interest in the learning itself. Students are still separated by age and often by alleged ability. They're still controlled by rewards and punishments. They still have very little to say about what they're learning. In most high schools, the instruction is still confined to those absurd 45- or 50-minute periods. Even from a purely physical standpoint, schools today look much as they did decades ago.

Assume for a moment that the critics are right about the sorry state of American education. Given that the evidence overwhelmingly shows that our schools remain very traditional, it's rather difficult for a fair-minded person to blame the problem on progressive "fads," which are actually rare. In fact, it may be the continued reliance on traditional practices that helps to explain why students aren't doing better.

Sadly, things are getting even worse. We are living through a very dark period, educationally speaking, as some of the best teachers and principals are getting tired—or fired—and the few oases of extraordinary teaching are drying up. Ironically, some of the disturbing practices responsible for this state of affairs are being implemented in the name of raising standards. People who know next to nothing about how children learn are imposing heavy-handed, top-down demands for "tougher standards" and "accountability." This plays well in the media but is truly making things worse for our children.

For example, researchers have found that there's a big difference between getting students to focus on what they're doing in class and getting them to focus on how well they're doing it. When we become preoccupied with "raising the bar" and demanding higher achievement, three things tend to happen: First, students come to view learning as a chore. Second, they don't think as deeply. And third, they prefer easier assignments since the emphasis is on being successful rather than on exploring ideas and a student is more likely to be successful if he or she avoids challenging tasks.

Furthermore, when people talk about "higher standards" these days, they usually just mean higher scores on standardized tests. But these tests are so bad that the pressure to raise scores typically leads to lower quality instruction. Every hour spent getting students to be better test takers is an hour not spent helping them to think like historians or scientists. The result is that the demands to raise standards are responsible for dumbing down our schools.

School leaders who value intellectual excellence will have to rethink the whole "tougher standards" movement -- its outdated pedagogy, its uncritical reliance on standardized tests, its uninformed assumptions about motivation and achievement, and its implicit belief that ratcheting up the difficulty level of teaching or testing produces better learning.

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