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**Case Against "Tougher Standards"
One-Size-Fits-All Doesn't Make the Grade**
by Alfie Kohn

People who talk about educational "standards" use the term in different ways. Sometimes they're referring to guidelines for teaching, the implication being that we should change the nature of instruction—a horizontal shift, if you will. In the case of the standards drafted by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics in 1989, for example, the idea was to shift away from isolated facts and memorized procedures and toward conceptual understanding and problem solving.

By contrast, when you hear someone say that we need to "raise standards," that represents a vertical shift, a claim that students ought to know more, do more, perform better. This can get confusing because discussions about standards sometimes are limited to only one of these meanings, sometimes flip-flop between them, and sometimes involve an implicit appeal to one in order to press for the other.

The idea of vertical movement seems hard to argue with, at least in the abstract. Don't we want schools to be of high quality, and students to be able to do many things well? Of course. But the current demand for Tougher Standards carries with it a bundle of assumptions about the proper role of schools, the nature and causes of failure, and the way students learn. That's why a number of people (mostly educators) have come to view with growing alarm what is now the dominant model of school reform.

People from parents to Presidents have begun to sound like cranky, ill-informed radio talk-show hosts, with the result that almost anything can be done to students and to schools, no matter how ill-considered, as long as it is done in the name of "raising standards" or "accountability." One is reminded of how a number of politicians, faced with the perception of high crime rates, resort to a get-tough, lock-'em-up, law-and-order mentality. This response plays well with the public but is based on an exaggeration of the problem, a misanalysis of its causes, and a simplistic prescription that frequently ends up doing more harm than good.

So too with demanding Tougher Standards in education. Back in 1959, public education critic John Holt wrote that the main effect "of the drive for so-called higher standards in schools is that the children

are too busy to think." Today, it is almost impossible to distinguish Democrats from Republicans on this set of issues-only those with some understanding of how children learn from those who haven't a clue.

The disagreement that plays itself out in boards of education and state legislatures is pretty much limited to a clash between, on one side, the champions of Tougher Standards (a constituency that includes virtually all corporate groups, the President and the Governors, the leadership of the American Federation of Teachers, and most reporters who write about education); and, on the other side, those on the extreme right wing whose suspicion of anything involving the federal government leads them to oppose national standards or testing. (They, too, tend to endorse the idea of Tougher Standards, but insist on local control.) That's pretty much the extent of the public debate on the subject. Left out almost entirely is the point of view of the students themselves, and the impact of standards on their learning.

The result is that, from California to New York, from Michigan to Texas, from Virginia to Colorado, the kind of teaching that helps students understand ideas from the inside out-and that sustains their interest in understanding-is under siege. One story can stand in for thousands: Not long ago, a widely respected middle-school teacher in Wisconsin, famous for helping students design their own innovative learning projects, stood up at a community meeting and announced that he "used to be" a good teacher. The auditorium fell silent at his use of the past tense. These days, he explained, he just handed out textbooks and quizzed his students on what they had memorized. The reason was very simple. He and his colleagues were increasingly being held accountable for raising test scores. The kind of wide-ranging and enthusiastic exploration of ideas that once characterized his classroom could no longer survive when the emphasis was on preparing students to take a standardized examination.

The purveyors of Tougher Standards had won, and therefore the students had lost.

Five Fatal Flaws of Tougher Standards

The Tougher Standards movement is fatally flawed in five separate ways.

1. It gets motivation wrong. Most talk of standards assumes that students ought to be thinking constantly about improving their performance. This single-minded concern with results turns out to be remarkably simplistic. The assumption that achievement is all that counts overlooks a substantial body of psychological research suggesting that a focus on how well one is doing is very different from a focus on what one is doing. Moreover, a preoccupation with

performance often undermines interest in learning, quality of learning, and a desire to be challenged.

2. It gets pedagogy wrong. The Tougher Standards contingent is big on back-to-basics, and, more generally, the sort of instruction that treats kids as though they were inert objects, that prepares a concoction called "basic skills" or "core knowledge" and then tries to pour it down their throats. State standards documents, in particular, typically contain long lists of specific facts and skills that all students in a given grade level are expected to master. This is a model that might be described as outdated were it not for the fact that, frankly, there never was a time when it worked all that well. Modern cognitive science just explains more systematically why it has always come up short.

3. It gets evaluation wrong. In practice, "excellence," "higher standards," and "raising the bar" all refer to scores on standardized tests, many of them multiple-choice, norm-referenced, and otherwise flawed. Indeed, much of the discussion about education today is arrested at the level of "Test scores are low; make them go up." All the limits of, and problems with, such testing amount to a serious indictment of the version of school reform that relies on these tests.

4. It gets school reform wrong. Proponents of Tougher Standards have a proclivity for trying to coerce improvement by specifying exactly what must be taught and learned-that is, by mandating a particular kind of education. There is good reason to doubt that the way one changes schooling is simply by demanding that teachers and students do things differently. "Accountability" usually turns out to be a code for tighter control over what happens in classrooms by people who are not in classrooms-and it has approximately the same effect on learning that a noose has on breathing.

5. It gets improvement wrong. Weaving its way through all these ideas is an implicit assumption about "rigor" and "challenge"-namely, that harder is always better. The reductive (and really rather silly) idea that tests, texts, and teachers can all be judged on the single criterion of difficulty level lurks behind complaints about "dumbing down" education and strident calls to "raise the bar." Its first cousin is the idea that if something isn't working very well-say, requiring students to do homework of dubious value-then insisting on more of the same will surely solve the problem. As Harvey Daniels (a nationally recognized author and education professor) puts it, the dominant philosophy of fixing schools today consists of saying, in effect, that "what we're doing is OK, we just need to do it harder, longer, stronger, louder, meaner, and we'll have a better country."

Any one of these five problems would be enough to raise serious questions about the call for Tougher Standards. Together, they suggest a threat of such dimensions that the only reasonable question for conscientious educators and parents is how we can most effectively change directions.

A Word about NCLB

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) places an overwhelming emphasis on standardized testing as a route to success in school. However, it is also designed to humiliate and hurt the schools that, according to its own warped standards, most need help. Families at those schools are given a green light to abandon them- and, specifically, to transfer to other schools. This, it quickly becomes clear, is an excellent way to sandbag the "successful" schools, too.

Those concerned about education must quit confining their complaints about NCLB to the peripheral problems of implementation or funding. Too many people give the impression that there would be nothing to object to if only their own school had been certified as making adequate progress, or if only Washington were more generous in paying for this assault on local autonomy. We have got to stop prefacing our objections by saying that, while the execution of this legislation is faulty, we agree with its laudable objectives. No. What we agree with is some of the rhetoric used to sell it, invocations of ideals like excellence and fairness. NCLB is not a step in the right direction. It is a deeply damaging, mostly ill-intentioned law, and no one genuinely committed to improving public schools (or to advancing the interests of those who have suffered from decades of neglect and oppression) would want to have anything to do with it.

The party line, of course, is that all these requirements are meant to make public schools improve, and that forcing every state to test every student every year (from third through eighth grades and then again in high school) is intended to identify troubled schools in order to "determine who needs extra help," as President Bush put it.

To anyone who makes this claim with a straight face, we might respond by asking two questions.

First, how many schools will NCLB-required testing reveal to be troubled that were not previously identified as such? For the last year or so, I have challenged defenders of the law to name a single school anywhere in the country whose inadequacy was a secret until yet

another wave of standardized test results was released. So far I have had no takers.

And second, of the many schools and districts that are obviously struggling, how many have received the resources they need, at least without a court order? If conservatives are sincere in saying they want more testing in order to determine where help is needed, what has their track record been in providing that help? The answer is painfully obvious, of course: Many of the same people who justify more standardized tests for information-gathering purposes have also claimed that more money doesn't produce improvement. The Bush administration's proposed budgets have fallen far short of what states would need just to implement NCLB itself, and those who point this out are dismissed as malcontents.

Tougher Standards Don't Make Grade

So, what have the results been of high-stakes testing to this point? To the best of my knowledge, no positive effects have ever been demonstrated, unless you count higher scores on these same tests. More low-income and minority students are dropping out, more teachers (often the best ones) are leaving the profession, and more mind-numbing test preparation is displacing genuine instruction. Why should anyone believe that annual do-or-die testing mandated by the federal government will lead to anything different? Moreover, the engine of this legislation is punishment.

Who will be left undisturbed and sitting pretty? Private schools and companies hoping to take over public schools. In the meantime, various corporations are already benefiting. As The Wall Street Journal stated in December 2003, "Teachers, parents, and principals may have their doubts about No Child Left Behind. But business loves it." Apart from the obvious bonanza for the giant companies that design and score standardized tests, WSJ further states "hundreds of 'supplemental service providers' have already lined up to offer tutoring, including Sylvan, Kaplan Inc. and Princeton Review Inc. " Kaplan says revenue for its elementary- and secondary-school division has doubled since No Child Left Behind passed."

In addition to testing and tutoring profits, corporate impact is also seen in the burgeoning sales of software to track student performance and interpret test data; classes for administrators and teachers to master test-prep techniques; and mid-career professional development courses to enable teachers to retain their "highly qualified" status.

Does Pubic Education Graduate?

How we take on the Tougher Standards movement may depend partly on practical considerations, such as where we can have the greatest impact. Those of us who see little benefit at all from standardized tests in their current forms need to remember that this is not an all-or-nothing crusade but a movement that can proceed incrementally. One way to begin is by fighting for the principles most likely to generate widespread support.

For example, most professional organizations, even those known for their relentless advocacy of the standards-and-testing agenda, have acknowledged that there is "virtually unanimous agreement among experts that no single measure should decide a student's academic fate." Even the companies that manufacture and sell the tests have come to this conclusion. To make students repeat a grade or deny them diplomas on the basis of a single exam is unconscionable-yet many states are doing so or planning to do so. This issue is not a bad point of entry for potential activists. It may be persuasive even to politicians who have not thought much about these issues and otherwise accept the slogans of standards and accountability.

Similarly, even people who are unwilling to dispense with standardized testing altogether may be open to persuasion that these tests should not be the only means by which students or schools are evaluated, inasmuch as they miss (or misrepresent) many aspects of student learning that ought to be assessed some other way. They should not be imposed by fiat on all schools in the state, with the result that communities are prevented from making their own decisions; should not be administered too often; are inappropriate for young children; and should be used only to rate, never to rank (since the goal is to derive useful information, not to create winners and losers and thereby discourage schools from working together).

This is not to say that we shouldn't also be inviting people to question ideological assumptions that are harder to dislodge - to consider, for example, that a preoccupation with results and achievement can in itself interfere with learning or that educational progress need not (and, to some extent, cannot) be reduced to numbers. But even someone who resists those ideas may agree that it is wrong to make a student's future hinge on a standardized test.

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