

Fighting the Tests: A Practical Guide to Rescuing Our Schools

Alfie Kohn

Don't let anyone tell you that standardized tests are not accurate measures. The truth of the matter is they offer a remarkably precise method for gauging the size of the houses near the school where the test was administered. Every empirical investigation of this question has found that socioeconomic status (SES) in all its particulars accounts for an overwhelming proportion of the variance in test scores when different schools, towns, or states are compared.¹ Ignorance would therefore be the most charitable explanation for the publication of charts that rank schools (or towns or states) by these scores -- or for the practice of using those rankings to draw conclusions about classroom practice.

However, if this was the only problem with standardized tests, we probably would not have sufficient reason to work for their elimination. After all, one could factor in SES in evaluating test results to determine the "true" score. And one could track a given school's (or district's) results over time; assuming no major demographic changes, a statistically significant shift in scores would then seem to be meaningful.

But here's the problem: even results corrected for SES are not very useful because the tests themselves are inherently flawed.² This assessment is borne out by research finding a statistical association between high scores on standardized tests and relatively shallow thinking. One such study classified elementary school students as "actively" engaged in learning if they went back over things they didn't understand, asked questions of themselves as they read, and tried to connect what they were doing to what they had already learned; and as "superficially" engaged if they just copied down answers, guessed a lot, and skipped the hard parts. It turned out that the superficial style was positively correlated with high scores on the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS) and the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT).³ Similar findings have emerged from studies of middle school and high school students.⁴ These are only statistical relationships, of course -- significant correlations, but not absolute correspondences. Many students think deeply *and* score well on tests, while many others do neither. But, as a rule, better standardized exam results are more likely to go hand-in-hand with a shallow approach to learning than with deep understanding.

What is true of a student's thinking is also true of a teacher's instruction. A rise in scores may be worse than meaningless: it may actually be reason for concern. What matters is how that change was brought about and what had to be sacrificed to make it happen. Across the nation, schools under intense pressure to show better test results have allowed those tests to cannibalize the curriculum. Administrators have cut back or even eliminated vital parts of schooling: programs in the arts, recess for young children, electives for high schoolers, class meetings (and other activities intended to promote

social and moral learning), discussions about current events (since that material will not appear on the test), the use of literature in the early grades (if the tests are focused narrowly on decoding skills), and entire subject areas such as science (if the tests cover only language arts and math). When students will be judged on the basis of a multiple-choice test, teachers may use multiple-choice exercises and in-class tests beforehand. (This has aptly been called the "dumbing down" of instruction, although curiously not by the conservative critics with whom that phrase is normally associated.) Teachers may even place all instruction on hold and spend time administering and reviewing practice tests.

In my experience, the people who work most closely with kids are the most likely to understand how harmful standardized testing is. Many teachers -- particularly those who are very talented -- have what might be described as a dislike/hate relationship with these exams. But support for testing seems to grow as you move away from the students, going from teacher to principal to central office administrator to school board member to state board member, state legislator, and governor. Those for whom classroom visits are occasional photo opportunities are most likely to be big fans of testing and to offer self-congratulatory sound bites about the need for "tougher standards" and "accountability." The more that parents and other members of the community learn about these tests, the more critical of them -- if not appalled by them -- they tend to become.[5](#)

There is much more to be said about how standardized tests measure what matters least, about their psychometric deficiencies and pedagogical consequences. But a good deal of this has already been said -- by me[6](#) and by others.[7](#) Readers of the *Kappan* may have come to the same conclusions based on their own experience.

Even someone who does not have to be convinced of the merit of the arguments, however, may need to be reminded of their cumulative significance. It is this: As the year 2001 begins, we are facing an educational emergency in this country. The intellectual life is being squeezed out of schools as they are transformed into what are essentially giant test-prep centers. The situation is most egregious, and the damage most pronounced, where high stakes are attached to the tests -- for example, where money is dangled in front of teachers, principals, and schools if they manage to raise the scores, or where students are actually forced to repeat a grade or denied a diploma on the basis of their performance of a single test.

Most of us have pet projects, favorite causes, practices and policies about which we care deeply. These include such issues as multiple intelligences, multiage classrooms, or multicultural curricula; cooperative learning, character education, or the creation of caring communities in schools; teaching for understanding, developmentally appropriate practice, or alternative assessment; the integration of writing or the arts into the curriculum; project- or problem-based learning, discovery-oriented science, or whole language; giving teachers or students more autonomy, or working with administrators to help them make lasting change. But every one of these priorities is gravely threatened by the top-down, heavy-handed, corporate-style, standardized version of school reform that is driven by testing. That's why all of us, despite our disparate agendas, need to make

common cause. We must make the fight against standardized tests our top priority because, until we have chased this monster from the schools, it will be difficult, perhaps even impossible, to pursue the kinds of reforms that can truly improve teaching and learning.

* * *

Whenever something in the schools is amiss, it makes sense for us to work on two tracks at once. We must do our best in the short term to protect students from the worst effects of a given policy, but we must also work to change or eliminate that policy. If we overlook the former -- the need to minimize the harm of what is currently taking place, to devise effective coping strategies -- then we do a disservice to children in the here and now. But (and this is by far the more common error) if we overlook the latter - the need to *alter* the current reality -- then we are condemning our children's children to having to make the best of the same unacceptable situation because it will still exist.

Standardized testing being a case in point, let me begin by offering these short-term responses:

First, if you are a teacher, you should do what is necessary to prepare students for the tests -- and then get back to the *real* learning. Never forget the difference between these two objectives. Be clear about it in your own mind, and whenever possible, help others to understand that the distinction. For example, you might send a letter to parents explaining what you are doing and why. ("Before we can design rigorous and exciting experiments in class, which I hope will have the effect of helping your child learn to think like a scientist, we're going to have to spend some time getting ready for the standardized tests being given next month. Hopefully we'll be able to return before too long to what research suggests is a more effective kind of instruction.") If you're lucky, parents will call you, indignantly demanding to know why their kids aren't able to pursue the more effective kind of instruction all the time. "Excellent question!" you'll reply, as you hand over a sheet containing the addresses and phone numbers of the local school board, state board of education, legislators, and the governor.

Second, do no more test preparation than is absolutely necessary. Some experts have argued that a relatively short period of introducing students to the content and format of the tests is sufficient to produce scores equivalent to those obtained by students who have spent the entire year in test-prep mode. "You don't need to study only the test and distort your entire curriculum eight hours a day, 180 days a year, for 12 years," says Harvey Daniels, who specializes in literacy education. "We've got very interesting studies where teachers do 35 or 38 weeks of what they think is best for kids, and then they'll give them three weeks of test cramming just before the test. And the kids do just as well as kids who have 40 weeks of test-driven curriculum."⁸ This is corroborated by some research that found a one-hour intensive reading readiness tutorial for young children produced test results equivalent to two *years* of skills-oriented direct instruction.⁹ (Of course, this will vary depending on the child and the nature of the test.) Or consider compromises such as this:

One first-grade teacher in Kentucky helped her students develop their own reading program, which moves them faster and more effectively through (and beyond) the district's reading program objectives than the basal. Even so, she is required by her school's administration to put her class through a basal reader program on a prescribed weekly schedule. The solution, quickly evolved by the class: They do each week's work in the basal on Monday, with little effort, then work on the meaningful curriculum -- theirs -- Tuesday through Friday.[10](#)

Third, whatever time *is* spent on test preparation should be as creative and worthwhile as possible. Avoid traditional drilling whenever you can. Several educators have figured out how to turn some of these tests into a kind of puzzle that children can play an active role in solving. The idea is to help students become adept at the particular skill called test-taking so they will be able to show what they already know.[11](#)

Fourth, administrators and other school officials should never brag about high (or rising) scores. To do so is not only misleading; it serves to legitimate the tests. In fact, people associated with high-scoring schools or districts have a unique opportunity to make an impact. It's easy for critics to be dismissed with a "sour grapes" argument: You're just opposed to standardized testing because it makes you look bad. But administrators and school board members in high-scoring areas can say, "Actually our students happen to do well on these tests, but that's nothing to be proud of. We value great teaching and learning, which is precisely what suffers when people become preoccupied with scores. Please join us in phasing them out."

Finally, whatever your position on the food chain of American education, one of your primary obligations is to be a buffer -- to absorb as much pressure as possible from those above you without passing it on to those below. If you are a superintendent or assistant superintendent facing school board members who want to see higher test scores, the most constructive thing you can do is protect principals from these ill-conceived demands to the best of your ability (without losing your job in the process). If you are a building administrator, on the receiving end of test-related missives from the central office, your challenge is to shield teachers from this pressure -- and, indeed, to help them pursue meaningful learning in their classrooms. If you are a teacher unlucky enough to work for an administrator who hasn't read this paragraph, your job is to minimize the impact on students. Try to educate those above you whenever it seems possible to do so, but cushion those below you every day. Otherwise you become part of the problem.

* * *

As important as I believe these suggestions to be, it is also critical to recognize their limits. There is only so much creativity that can be infused into preparing students for bad tests. There is only so much buffering that can be done in a high-stakes environment. These recommendations merely try to make the best of a bad thing. Ultimately we need to work to end that bad thing, to move beyond stopgap measures and take on the system itself.

Unfortunately, even some well-intentioned educators who understand the threat posed by testing never get to that point. Here are some of the justifications they offer for their inaction:

"Just teach well and the tests will take care of themselves." This may be true in some subject areas, or in some states, or in some neighborhoods. But it is often a convenient delusion. Especially in science and social studies, to prepare students for the tests in the most effective way may well be to teach badly -- to fill them full of dates and definitions and cover a huge amount of material in a superficial fashion. Conversely, to teach in a way that helps students understand (and become enthusiastic about) ideas may actually lower their scores. Linda McNeil's description of the choice faced by Texas educators will be instantly and painfully familiar to teachers across the country -- but may come as news to some parents, school board members, politicians, and reporters:

The myth of the proficiencies [that is, the standards] was that because they were aimed at minimum skills, they would change only the weakest teaching. The "good" teachers would as a matter of course "already be covering" this material and so would not have to make adjustments. In fact, the transformation of the curriculum into received knowledge, to be assessed by students' selection of one answer among four provided on a computer-scored test, undermined both the quality and quantity that "good teachers" could present to their students. . . . [Thus,] teachers faced serious ethical dilemmas. They could teach to the proficiencies and assure high test scores for their students. Or they could teach the curricula they had been developing (and wanted to continue to develop) and teach not only a richer subject matter but also one that was aimed at students' understanding and their long-term learning, not the short-term goals inherent in the district testing of memorized fragments. This was not an easy choice.¹²

Nor is the dilemma likely to be painlessly resolved by consultants who tell us we need only adopt a specific instructional reform to have the best of both worlds: an intellectually impressive classroom that will help students meet the state standards. The degree of standardization in most accountability-based systems is so high, and the quality of the tests is so low, that the proposed reform either (a) will not raise the scores or (b) isn't particularly impressive after all. That's why we should react with caution, if not alarm, to the word *alignment*. The dictates to which we are supposed to be aligning the curriculum are often pedagogically suspect, and the motive for doing so may have more to do with compliance than with what is in the best interest of children. Moreover, even if their objectives and our motives were defensible, the process of alignment typically requires a degree of uniformity -- and is undertaken with a degree of rigidity -- that ought to raise concerns about the whole enterprise.

"This too shall pass." Education has its fads, and standards on steroids may be one of them, but there is no guarantee that it will fade away on its own. Too much is invested by now; too many powerful interest groups are backing high-stakes testing for us to assume

it will simply fall of its own weight. In any case, too many children will be sacrificed in the meantime if we don't take action to expedite its demise.

"*My job is to teach, not to get involved in political disputes.*" When seven-year-olds can't read good books because they are being drilled on what Jonathan Kozol calls "those obsessively enumerated particles of amputated skill associated with upcoming state exams,"¹³ the schools have already been politicized. The only question is whether we will become involved on the other side -- that is, on the side of real learning. In particular, much depends on whether those teachers and administrators who already harbor (and privately acknowledge) concerns about testing are willing to go public, to take a stand, to say, "This is bad for kids." To paraphrase a famous quotation, all that is necessary for the triumph of damaging educational policies is that good educators keep silent.

22. "*The standards and tests are here to stay; we might as well get used to them.*" Here we have a sentiment diametrically opposed to "This too shall pass," yet one that paradoxically leads to the identical inaction. Real children in real classrooms suffer from this kind of defeatism, which can quickly become a self-fulfilling prophecy: assume something is inevitable and it becomes so precisely because we have decided not to challenge it. The fact of the matter is that standardized tests are not like the weather, something to which we must resign ourselves. They haven't always existed and they don't exist in most parts of the world. What we are facing is not a force of nature but a force of politics, and political decisions can be questioned, challenged, and ultimately reversed.

* * *

How we take on the tests 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, even *Education Week*, known for its relentless advocacy of the standards-and-testing agenda, has acknowledged that there is "virtually unanimous agreement among experts that no single measure should decide a student's academic fate."¹⁴ This is true: the prestigious National Research Council came to that conclusion,¹⁵ as have most other professional organizations (such as the American Educational Research Association and the American Psychological Association), the generally pro-testing American Federation of Teachers and even the companies that manufacture and sell the tests. To make students repeat a grade or deny them diplomas on the basis of a single exam is unconscionable -- yet about half the states, at this writing, are either 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.¹⁶

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;
- should not, in any case, be imposed by fiat on all schools in the state, with the result that communities are prevented from making their own decisions;[17](#)
- 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,[18](#) 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.

Some of the ideas that follow can be pursued individually, but most depend on working with others. Thus, the first suggestion is to *organize*. Find people in your area who share your concerns so you can have a more powerful impact together. You are not alone in opposing standardized testing, but without collective action, you might as well be. So work with friends, neighbors, and colleagues to set up study groups, committees, phone trees, websites, and listservs. Give yourselves an organizational name, print up some letterhead, and you instantly gain more credibility. (Now you're not just a bunch of rebels. You're the "[name of area] Educators Opposing Excessive Testing.") Every person who seems interested in becoming involved should be asked to find ten more potential recruits, and each of those recruits should be asked to do the same. Even as you engage in the activities listed below, you should be continuing to fold others into the effort.[19](#)

There is no reason, however, to waste time duplicating someone else's efforts. You may want to begin by checking out and joining an existing network if one is already active in your area, such as the one accessible on my website (go to www.alfiekohn.org, click on "Standards and Testing," and follow the links) or that of the nation's leading organization challenging standardized testing, FairTest (www.fairtest.org). This group also has a quarterly newsletter, a storehouse of useful documents, and a listserv called the Assessment Reform Network (ARN).

Whether you join an existing organization or help to form a new one, begin by learning all you can about the tests used in your state as well as more generic testing issues. Then:

- Talk to friends and neighbors at every opportunity: in line at the supermarket, in the dentist's waiting room, on airplanes, at the hairdresser's and the playground, at dinner parties and children's birthday parties. Help people in your community understand that if a local official boasts about rising test scores, they should

- consider responding, "You know, if that's what you're mostly concerned about, then I'm worried about the quality of my child's schooling."
- Get in the habit of attending -- and speaking out at -- school board meetings and other events dealing with educational policy.
 - Let parents know they can write a letter to school administrators or board members expressing concern that test preparation is eclipsing more important learning activities. Here is a sample, provided by James Popham:[20](#)

Dear _____:

I want to register my concern that there seems to be an excessive emphasis in our school on getting students ready for the standardized achievement tests scheduled for administration during (*give the month of the upcoming test-administration*). The reason I'm concerned is that I'm fearful the teaching staff's preoccupation with raising scores on those tests may be preventing the teachers from covering other important skills and knowledge that the school's students need.

I realize that you and your teaching staff are under considerable pressure to "raise test scores" because it is widely believed that students' scores on standardized achievement tests reflect the quality of a teaching staff and, by implication, the quality of the school's principal.

I've been doing some reading on that topic, and I understand why it is that students' standardized test scores do *not* provide an appropriate indication of a teaching staff's competence. Scores on those tests are more a reflection of the student population served by a school than an indication of the skill of the school's educators.

I hope that you and your staff will address this test-preparation issue in the near future. Parents want the school's children to get the very best education possible. I'm sure you do too. That will not happen, however, if our school's heavy emphasis on test-preparation deflects the school's teachers from dealing with the curricular content our children need.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

- Write to -- or, better yet, pull together a delegation of concerned citizens and then visit -- your state legislators and other public officials. (This is the sort of familiar and predictable recommendation that you may be tempted to skip over, but it really ought to be taken seriously. Politicians respond to pointed and persistent lobbying, and, as a rule, they haven't heard nearly enough from those of us who feel strongly about this issue.) Your goal may be simply to educate policy makers

about the effects of testing, or it may be to encourage them to oppose (or support) specific policies and legislation.

- Write letters to the editor -- or, better yet, op-eds -- for your local newspaper.
- Organize a delegation of educators and/or parents and request a meeting with the education reporter and top editors of your paper. Help them to see how problematic it is to cite rising or falling test scores as an indication of educational quality. Explain to them that most experts in the field oppose high-stakes testing in particular. And tell them: "Every time you publish a chart that ranks schools on the basis of test scores, our kids' learning suffers. Here's why"
- Sponsor a forum or teach-in on testing. Invite the media. Sign up new volunteers. Such a meeting might carry a provocative title to attract those already on your side (e.g., "Standardized Testing: Waste of Time Or Menace to Children?"), but then again it might be promoted in more neutral terms ("Rethinking Standardized Testing") to attract more people. Those responsible for the tests can be invited to appear and respond to questions.
- Print up bumper stickers with slogans such as STANDARDIZED TESTING IS DUMBING DOWN OUR SCHOOLS. (Here, it is definitely appropriate to be provocative.)²¹
- Participate in -- and ensure press coverage of -- some form of protest. This can include marches and demonstrations, as well as other, more targeted activities, such as those already taking place in some areas, described below.
- For every workshop on in-service event offered by educational service agencies, universities, and administrators that provide advice on raising test scores and teaching to the standards, three should be offered that encourage teachers to *challenge* the standards and tests -- or at least help them think about how to protect their students from the damaging effects.
- Invite researchers in the area to commission a survey. When it's completed, release the results at a press conference. One group of investigators suggested including these questions:
- Do the tests improve students' motivation? Do parents understand the results? Do teachers think that the tests measure the curriculum fairly? Do administrators use the results wisely? How much money is spent on assessment and related services? How much time do teachers spend preparing students for various tests? Do the media report the data accurately and thoroughly? Our surveys suggest that many districts will be shocked to discover the degree of dissatisfaction among stakeholders.²²
- Challenge politicians, corporate executives, and others who talk piously about the need to "raise the bar," impose "tougher standards," ensure "accountability," etc., etc., to take the tests themselves. This is especially important in the case of high-stakes exit exams, which are increasingly being used to deny diplomas to students who don't pass them. In many states, the reality is that few adults could pass these tests.

There are two ways to issue such an invitation to decision makers: as a private opportunity for them to learn more about (and, perhaps, understand the absurdity of) the exam, or as a public challenge for them to take the test and agree to have their scores

published in the newspaper. The first approach was used in West Bend, Wisconsin, where about 30 business leaders took a short version of the state's proposed graduation exam. They "had so much trouble with it that some wonder[ed] whether it truly will measure the quality of future employees." One bank executive -- presumably a supporter of testing in the abstract until he encountered the actual test -- remarked, "I think it's good to challenge students, but not like this."[23](#)

The second approach was taken by the *St. Petersburg Times* when it "challenged several top elected officials to join 735,000 Florida schoolchildren . . . by taking the rigorous Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. They declined. Some did so with a sense of humor. Some admitted the math might give them fits. Others were unamused by the entire exercise. All said no."[24](#) Educators and parents might consider holding a press conference to issue such a public challenge, arguing that if officials fear they won't be able to pass the test, they should be prepared to justify requiring teenagers to do something that they, themselves, cannot. And if they refuse the challenge, they should be called on to defend their refusal.

- Consider filing a lawsuit against the tests, which are potentially vulnerable in many ways. They may be inherently discriminatory. They may be used despite the absence of evidence that they are statistically valid measurement instruments. They may be inconsistent with the state's own standards -- or require students to know that which hasn't yet been taught.
- Investigate whether your state has an "opt-out" clause that allows parents to exempt their children from testing just by notifying the authorities. These are not widely known -- indeed, even some activists are not always aware of their existence in their own states -- but they ought to be publicized if they are on the books where you live.
- Perhaps the most extreme -- but, in the opinion of a growing number of people, well justified -- strategy is to boycott the tests even where there is no opt-out provision. If that suggestion seems drastic, I can only respond that desperate circumstances call for drastic action. Punitive consequences are being meted out on the basis of manifestly inadequate and inappropriate exams. Children are literally becoming sick with fear over their scores. We are facing the prospect that massive numbers of students -- particularly low-income and minority students -- will be pushed out of school altogether.[25](#)

In short, more and more people believe that writing letters to the editor isn't enough, that a line has been crossed such that we can no longer justify our participation in -- and tacit support of -- these testing programs. One kind of boycott involves students who, on their own or at their parents' behest, refuse to show up for tests and make it clear why they are doing so. There are various ways in which educators can support such an action: by making sure that students and parents know that boycotts already are taking place elsewhere, by speaking out in support of those who decide to do this, by teaching students about the theory and practice of civil disobedience, by suggesting alternative educational activities in which prospective boycotters can participate on test day, and by lobbying local officials to make sure that these students are not punished. (Of course,

educators who are also parents can invite their own children to consider being part of such a protest.)

In another kind of boycott, teachers and administrators themselves refuse to be part of the testing program. Like Bartleby in Melville's short story, who created an uproar when, "in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, 'I would prefer not to,'" they declare that they simply cannot in good conscience break the shrink-wrap on those exams and thereby become part of something they believe is bad for children. It takes considerable courage to put one's job on the line. Yet that courage has already been displayed, with striking results, in other countries. "Elementary [school] achievement is high" in Japan, for example, partly because teachers in that country "are free from the pressure to teach to standardized tests." It is important to understand *why* there are no such tests in that country (with the exception of an infamous university admission exam): it is because Japanese teachers collectively refused to administer them. For many years now, they have successfully prevented the government from doing to their children what our government is doing to our children.²⁶ Similarly, in the early 1990s, teachers in England and Wales basically stopped the new national testing program in its tracks, at least for a while, by a similar act of civil disobedience. What began there "as an unfocused mishmash of voices became a united boycott involving all teacher unions, a large number of governing bodies, and mass parental support." Teachers made it clear that their action was taken in behalf of students, based on their recognition that "to teach well for the tests was in effect to teach badly."²⁷

In 1999, Jim Bougas, a middle school teacher in a small town in Massachusetts, noticed that the history portion of the state's MCAS exam required students to answer questions about the Civil War even though the state's own guidelines called for that topic to be covered at the end of the year, after the test was administered. For him, this was the last straw with respect to a testing system that was already geared toward memorization and was forcing instruction to become more superficial. The teacher, a soft-spoken man who had been teaching for 28 years, informed his principal that he would not administer the test. He was reassigned to the library during that period, and a stern letter of reprimand was placed in his file along with a warning not to repeat his protest. The next year, following a denial of his request to be reassigned to other duties when the test was to be administered, he agonized about what to do. Finally, he decided that if the test was just as unfair and destructive in 2000 as it had been in 1999, his response could not be any different -- even at the risk of suspension or dismissal. Besides, as he told a reporter, "if the MCAS continues, I have no job because they've taken it away from me as long as I have to spend my time teaching to the test. I can't do that anymore. So I have nothing to lose."²⁸

Such a protest is not only inspirational to many of us but an invitation to ponder the infinitely greater impact of *collective* action. Imagine, for example, that a teacher at any given school in your area quietly approached each person on the staff in turn and asked: "If ___ percent of the teachers at this school pledged to boycott the next round of testing, would you join them?" (The specific percentage would depend on what seemed realistic and yet signified sufficient participation to offer some protection for those involved.)

Then, if the designated number was reached, each teacher would be invited to take part in what would be a powerful act of civil disobedience. Press coverage would likely be substantial, and despairing-but-cowed teachers in other schools might be encouraged to follow suit.

Without question, this is a risky undertaking. Theoretically, even an entire school faculty could be fired. But the more who participate, and the more careful they are about soliciting support from parents and other members of the community beforehand, the more difficult it would be for administrators to respond harshly. (Of course, some administrators are as frustrated with the testing as teachers are.) Participants would have to be politically savvy, building alliances and offering a coherent, quotable rationale for their action. They would need to make it clear -- at a press conference and in other forums -- that they were taking this action not because they are unwilling to do more work or are afraid of being held accountable, but because these tests lower the quality of learning and do a serious injustice to the children in our community.

The bottom line is that standardized testing can continue only with the consent and cooperation of the educators who allow those tests to be distributed in their schools -- and the parents who permit their children to take them. If we withhold that consent, if we refuse to cooperate, then the testing process grinds to a halt. That is what happened in Japan. That is what can happen in the United States if we understand the urgency of the situation. Discuss it with your university students, your staff, your colleagues: What if they gave a test and nobody came?

* * *

Most of these suggestions -- along with other acts of resistance -- spring not from someone's imagination but from real activities being undertaken around the country. Parents in Wisconsin successfully lobbied their state legislators to prevent a high-school exit exam from being the sole determinant of whether students are permitted to graduate -- a stinging defeat for Gov. Tommy Thompson. In Florida, where schools are graded on the basis of test scores, with successful schools receiving more money and the neediest schools threatened with a loss of funding, a group of teachers and their principal at an "A" school (Gulf Gate Elementary) publicly refused to accept their bonuses. In a similar protest in North Carolina, teachers (at East Chapel Hill High School) pooled their state bonus checks and formed a foundation to send grants to the state's poorer schools.

Parents and teachers have taken to the streets in Colorado and Ohio. Lawsuits have been filed in Louisiana, Indiana, and Nevada to challenge the legality of high-stakes tests. (The first case to go to trial, in Texas, was decided in favor of the state.) Petitions are being circulated, locally and nationally; legislators are being lobbied; websites are being set up in several states to help testing opponents coordinate their efforts.²⁹ And individuals are courageously challenging the system in a variety of ways. In early 1999, George Schmidt, a veteran Chicago high school teacher, published some of that city's tests (after students had already taken them) in a small independent newspaper so that the public could evaluate the validity and value of the questions. He was promptly charged

with "gross disruption of the educational process," suspended without pay, and sued for \$1.4 million. Eugene Garcia, dean of the school of education at the University of California, Berkeley, resigned his position on an advisory committee to the State Board of Education. He did so to protest -- and draw attention to -- the Board's decision to subject students with limited English proficiency to tests on which they are certain to do poorly just because they don't speak the language. He then called for parents of such students to decline to participate in the testing program, thereby increasing the number of English-speaking students who would score below the median (since the state's high-stakes test, incredibly, is norm-referenced). These results, he speculated, might shock some of these families into opposing the tests.

Most impressive, and most dramatic, has been the growing number of boycotts all across the nation. Parents have said, in effect, "Not with my child you don't!" and refused to allow their children to take the tests. At first in scattered fashion -- reflecting the lack of coordination among people who had independently decided the tests were destructive -- students either declined to take them or failed them on purpose. This happened as long ago as 1989 in Torrance, Calif. and two years later in a parent-led protest involving several Colorado districts. Then, in 1998-99, parents across Michigan exempted 22.5 percent of students from the high school proficiency portion of the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). Some districts had up to 90 percent of their students waived from taking the test, suggesting a "grassroots revolt by parents and students."³⁰ The following year, high school students walked out on a test in Marin County, Calif., calling it unjust that non-English-speaking students would have to take an English-language test, while students at the Whitney Young Magnet School in Chicago deliberately flunked the Illinois exam, saying they "refused to feed this test-taking frenzy." That same year, there were protests in Danvers, Cambridge, and Newton, Mass. and in Merton, Wisc. Last spring, a genuine boycott movement spread across Massachusetts, with hundreds of students sitting out that state's required tests as the result of a student-led campaign, with something similar happening in Illinois.

Boycotters and other protesters are disturbed not only by the tests themselves but by the profoundly undemocratic nature of what passes for school reform today: a one-size-fits-all set of standards and assessments handed down from the state capital and imposed with the force of law. Thus, individual schools or districts may devise thoughtful criteria for awarding a high school diploma, perhaps using what the Coalition of Essential Schools calls "exhibitions" of mastery -- only to have the state's education czar brush aside such alternatives and declare that nothing will count except a student's score on a uniform set of pencil-and-paper tests. This is precisely what has happened in New York, and it has recently led to an intriguing and constructive form of rebellion. A group of superintendents in Monroe County (whose students happen to do quite well on the state's Regents exams) are in the early stages of creating an independent local board that will issue a diploma to students "who meet a set of validated criteria based on multiple assessments and multiple forms of assessment," according to William Cala, the superintendent of Fairport Schools. Representatives of business and higher education will help to formulate these criteria and then oversee administration of the diplomas. The participation of these groups will ensure that receiving a county rather than state-

sanctioned diploma will not put students at a disadvantage. Indeed, a document that certifies the ability to think deeply in different ways, using a variety of formats -- and to apply knowledge in realistic situations -- ultimately may be worth more than a diploma certifying the ability to take standardized tests well. Moreover, the schooling that *precedes* graduation may be far more worthwhile than the sort held hostage to conventional exit exams. In any event, the idea of creating a legally valid, practically useful, locally devised diploma neatly neutralizes the standards-and-accountability autocracy. What state authorities are doing already lacks logic and the support of research. Now it may be stripped of the one thing it does possess: the power to compel compliance.

Less because of such protests than because decision makers are starting to realize the catastrophic effects of high-stakes testing, there has been some tinkering with the tests. It appears that more states will step back from the brink, particularly when it becomes clear that affluent, white students may be affected. Some test backers grudgingly concede that they may have moved a little too quickly, and now we are witnessing a delay of implementation here, a lower passing grade there, some sanctions waived and some expectations softened. This tentative response has already begun to generate a counterreaction from hard-core pundits and politicians who affect a macho tone and taunt those responsible for watering down the tests and giving in to pressure groups (such as alarmed parents). As a harsh, punitive approach begins to reveal itself as counterproductive, this contingent has responded by demanding an even harsher, more punitive response.

In fact, though, the problem with this back-pedaling is that it doesn't go nearly far enough. Those who understand the weaknesses of standardized tests -- and, indeed, the deficiencies of the whole tougher standards sensibility -- will derive scant comfort from efforts to adjust the scores required for passing or to tinker with the applications of rewards and punishments. These minor repairs don't address the underlying problems with using such exams to judge students and educators, much less to bully them into higher scores. We are not quibbling about how high or how fast; we are calling the whole enterprise into question. We are not proposing to make school easier, but to make it better -- and that requires rethinking standardized testing, *per se*.

Notes

1 A study of math scores on the 1992 National Assessment of Educational Progress found that the combination of four variables unrelated to instruction (number of parents living at home, parents' educational background, type of community [e.g., "disadvantaged urban," "extreme rural"], and state poverty rate) explained a whopping 89 percent of the differences in state scores. In fact, one of those variables, the number of students who had one parent living at home, accounted for 71 percent of the variance all by itself. See Glen E. Robinson and David P. Brandon, *NAEP Test Scores: Should They Be Used to Compare and Rank State Educational Quality?* (Arlington, Va.: Educational Research Service, 1994). The same pattern holds within states. In Massachusetts, five factors explained 90 percent of the variance in scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive

Assessment System (MCAS) exam, leading a researcher to conclude that students' performance "has almost everything to do with parental socioeconomic backgrounds and less to do with teachers, curricula, or what the children learned in the classroom." See Kevin J. Clancy, "Making More Sense of MCAS Scores," *Boston Globe*, 24 April 2000, p. A19. Another study looked just at the poverty level in each of 593 districts in Ohio and found a .80 correlation with 1997 scores on that state's proficiency test, meaning that this measure alone explained nearly two-thirds of the differences in test results. See Randy L. Hoover, "Forces and Factors Affecting Ohio Proficiency Test Performance," available at <<http://cc.yosu.edu/~rlhoover/OPT>>. Even a quick look at the grades given to Florida schools under that state's new rating system found that "no school where less than 10% of the students qualify for free lunch scored below a C, and no school where more than 80% of the students qualify scored above a C." See Jodi Wilgoren, "Florida's Vouchers a Spur to Two Schools Left Behind," *New York Times*, 14 March 2000, p. A18. Then there is the SAT, which, far from being a measure of merit (sometimes pointedly contrasted with affirmative action criteria), is largely a measure of family income. Break down the test takers by income, measured in \$10,000 increments, and without exception the scores rise with each jump in parents' earnings. See "1999 College Bound Seniors' Test Scores: SAT," *Fair Test Examiner*, Fall 1999, p. 13; the information is also available at <<http://www.collegeboard.org>>.

2 The nature and extent of those flaws vary with the nature of the testing program, of course. Exams that are norm-referenced, timed, composed largely of multiple-choice questions, given to young children, or designed to measure the short-term acquisition of isolated facts and skills are particularly unhelpful.

3 See Judith L. Meece, Phyllis C. Blumenfeld, and Rick H. Hoyle, "Students' Goal Orientations and Cognitive Engagement in Classroom Activities," *Journal of Educational Psychology* vol. 80, 1988, pp. 514-23. The correlation was .28, significant at $p < .001$.

4 The middle school students "who value literacy activities and who are task-focused toward literacy activities" got lower scores on the CTBS reading test. See Eric M. Anderman, "Motivation and Cognitive Strategy Use in Reading and Writing." Paper presented at the National Reading Conference, San Antonio, Tex., December 1992. The same pattern showed up with high schoolers taking the SAT: researchers classified students' approaches to studying as "surface" (doing as little as possible and sticking to rote memorization), "deep" (understanding ideas and connecting new material to existing knowledge), or "achieving" (trying to get good grades and beat everyone else, without interest in what was being learned). It turned out that those who adopted a surface or achieving style did the best on the SAT. Scores were negatively correlated with a deep approach to learning. See Cathy W. Hall, Larry M. Bolen, and Robert H. Gupton, Jr., "Predictive Validity of the Study Process Questionnaire for Undergraduate Students," *College Student Journal*, vol. 29, 1995, pp. 234-39.

5 It would be instructive to see a poll that measured familiarity with the tests as well as attitudes about testing, and then looked at the interaction between the two. But we do not have to speculate about the effect of becoming familiar with alternatives to standardized

tests. A survey of parents of third graders in an ethnically diverse, working-class district near Denver found higher levels of support for performance assessments than for standardized tests once the former option was presented and explained. Parents in this study were shown examples of standardized test questions such as "How much change will you get if you have \$6.55 and spend \$4.32? [a] \$2.23 [b] \$2.43 [c] \$3.23 [d] \$10.87" as well as performance assessment questions such as "Suppose you couldn't remember what 8×7 is. How could you figure it out?" A large majority of respondents preferred performance assessments. Indeed, many remarked that the latter were more challenging and gave teachers more insight into what the students understood and where they were struggling. The researchers admitted being "surprised that parents rated informal sources of information -- talking to the teacher and seeing graded samples of their child's work -- as more useful than standardized tests for learning about their 'child's progress in school' and even for judging the 'quality of education provided at their child's school.'" Clearly, they concluded, "parents' favorable ratings of standardized national tests do not imply a preference for such measures over other less formal sources of information." See Lorrie A. Shepard and Carrieth L. Bliem, "Parents' Thinking About Standardized Tests and Performance Assessments," *Educational Researcher*, November 1995, pp. 25-32.)

[6](#) See Alfie Kohn, *The Case Against Standardized Testing: Raising the Scores, Ruining the Schools* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2000) or chapter 4 of *The Schools Our Children Deserve* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), from which much of the former book was adapted.

[7](#) See, for example, Peter Sacks, *Standardized Minds* (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus, 1999); and Kathy Swope and Barbara Miner, eds., *Failing Our Kids: Why the Testing Craze Won't Fix Our Schools* (Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools, 2000). For background information about these tests, see Gerald W. Bracey, *Put to the Test: An Educator's and Consumer's Guide to Standardized Testing* (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa, 1998); and any of several publications by W. James Popham.

[8](#) Harvey Daniels, "Whole Language: What's the Fuss?" *Rethinking Schools*, Winter 1993, p. 5

[9](#) See Merle B. Karnes, Allan M. Shwedel, and Mark B. Williams, "A Comparison of Five Approaches for Educating Young Children from Low-Income Homes." In *As the Twig Is Bent . . . : Lasting Effects of Preschool Programs*, edited by The Consortium for Longitudinal Studies (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1983), pp. 133-69.

[10](#) See Hilton Smith, "Foxfire Teachers' Networks," in John M. Novak, ed., *Democratic Teacher Education: Programs, Processes, Problems, and Prospects* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 29.

[11](#) See Kathe Taylor and Sherry Walton, *Children at the Center: A Workshop Approach to Standardized Test Preparation, K-8* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1998); and Lucy Calkins, Kate Montgomery, and Donna Santman, *A Teacher's Guide to Standardized Reading Tests: Knowledge Is Power* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1998). Several

articles in the December 1996 / January 1997 issue of *Educational Leadership* are also relevant.

[12](#) Linda M. McNeil, *Contradictions of School Reform: Educational Costs of Standardized Testing* (New York: Routledge, 2000) , pp. 204, 203.

[13](#) Jonathan Kozol, Foreword to *Will Standards Save Public Education?* by Deborah Meier (Boston: Beacon, 2000), p. x.

[14](#) Lynn Olson, "Worries of a Standards 'Backlash' Grow," *Education Week*, 5 April 2000, p. 12. Note that even the headline of this article assumes that a backlash against the standards-and-testing movement is something one should worry about rather than welcome -- a bias reflected in most coverage of the issue.

[15](#) "No single test score can be considered a definitive measure of a student's knowledge," so "an educational decision that will have a major impact on a test taker should not be made solely or automatically on the basis of a single test score. Other relevant information about the student's knowledge and skills should also be taken into account," according to Jay P. Heubert and Robert M. Hauser, eds. *High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion, and Graduation* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1999).

[16](#) For example, one Republican state legislator in Delaware announced: "I cannot support, under any circumstances, a test that will be the be-all and end-all of a student's [getting a diploma]. So why don't we just remove that? How have we ever got to the point where we allow one test to determine our children's future?" At that point in the debate, according to a newspaper account, "several in the chamber spoke of how they had successfully moved from high school through college to even advanced degrees without having to pass a single, difficult, standardized test. Others recalled conversations with teachers who admitted they would not be successful taking the tests themselves. 'It seems like we're trying to treat the symptom instead of the disease,'" remarked another Republican representative, adding, "The problem is the testing." See Tom Eldred, "Education Bill Passes Delaware House," *Delaware State News*, 17 March 2000. Similarly, Pennsylvania's state board of education ruled out a test to determine whether students would receive a diploma, with one board member commenting, "I couldn't sit here in this seat and take that kind of decision out of the hands of teachers who had worked hard with the students for 13 years." See Christopher Newton, "State Education Board Rules Out High School Test," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 20 April 2000.

[17](#) This argument in particular resonates with people across the political spectrum.

[18](#) For more on this point, see *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, chap. 2.

[19](#) For further thoughts on helping educators to become more adept at political organizing, see Ellen H. Brinkley and Constance Weaver, "Organizing for Political Action: Suggestions from Experience," in Kenneth S. Goodman, ed., *In Defense of Good*

Teaching: What Teachers Need to Know About the "Reading Wars" (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1998), pp. 183-90.

[20](#) This letter appears in W. James Popham, *Testing! Testing!: What Every Parent Should Know About School Tests* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000), p. 284.

[21](#) One bumper sticker now being circulated asks, IS STANDARDIZED TESTING HURTING OUR KIDS? Another, more decisive one features the initials of the state's test in a circle with a red diagonal slash running through them, followed by: THESE TESTS HURT KIDS! Meanwhile, some educators have printed up t-shirts that read, HIGH STAKES ARE FOR TOMATOES.

[22](#) Scott G. Paris, Theresa A. Lawton, Julianne C. Turner, and Jodie L. Roth, "A Developmental Perspective on Standardized Achievement Testing," *Educational Researcher*, June-July 1991, p. 17.

[23](#) Anne Davis, "Executives in West Bend Struggle with Sample of State Graduation Test," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 20 January 1999.

[24](#) Stephen Hegarty, "Officials Dodge FCAT Dare," *St. Petersburg Times*, 13 February 2000.

[25](#) On the respects in which standardized testing is most damaging to low-income and minority students, see Alfie Kohn, *The Case Against Standardized Testing*, chap. 4; Kohn, "Standardized Testing and Its Victims," *Education Week*, 27 September 2000, pp. 60, 46, 47; Swope and Miner; and McNeil.

[26](#) See Catherine C. Lewis, *Educating Hearts and Minds: Reflections on Japanese Preschool and Elementary Education* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 201, 16.

[27](#) Jane Coles, "Enough Was Enough: The Teachers' Boycott of National Curriculum Testing," *Changing English* (published by the University of London's Institute of Education), vol. 1, no. 2, 1994, pp. 16, 23.

[28](#) This account is based on Robin Lord, "Harwich Teacher Refused to Hand Out MCAS Test," *Cape Cod Times*, 3 June 1999; Ed Hayward, "MCAS Opponents Hold Rally in Hub," *Boston Herald*, 16 May 2000; and personal communications. Bougas received a two-week suspension without pay in May 2000 but, at this writing, still has his job. Several other Massachusetts teachers have also refused to administer the MCAS, so far without repercussions.

[29](#) For example, <<http://www.stopopts.org>> in Ohio; <<http://personal.cfw.com/~dday/VASOLs.html>> in Virginia; <<http://www.xfcats.com>> in Florida; <<http://www.geocities.com/nccds/index.html>> in North Carolina; <<http://www.taasblues.com>> in Texas; <<http://www.castausa.com>> in Nevada;

<<http://www.cpog.org>> in Georgia; <<http://www.fairtest.org/arn/masspage.html>> in Massachusetts; <<http://www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/meap.html>> in Michigan; and <<http://www.stopAIMSnow.org>>.

30 Tracy Van Moorlehem, "Students, Parents Rebel Against State Test," Detroit Free Press, 29 April 1998, p. 1-A. Overall, "those opting out of the test tend to be average or above-average students," some of whom wore t-shirts that urged their peers to "just say no" to the test, Moorlehem reports. In response, state officials did not reconsider the value of the tests but began offering students substantial scholarships for high scores.