

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Education: Winners and losers?

School begins in two weeks. Time for school districts to start teaching to the test: the all-important PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment) which will be administered next spring, with the results published by the State Department of Education so the public can “tsk-
tsk” and rank schools.



I hope the following essay by Alfie Kohn, one of America’s most astute educational critics, will provide some perspective.

Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

By Alfie Kohn
Here’s a
thought experi-
ment. Suppose

that next year virtually every student passed the tests. What would the reaction be from politicians, business-people, the media? Would these people shake their heads in admiration and say, “*Damn*, those teachers must be good!”?

Of course not. Such remarkable success would be cited as evidence that the tests were too easy.

In the real world, when scores have improved sharply, this has indeed been the reaction. For example, when results on New York’s math exam rose in 2009, the chancellor of the state’s Board of Regents said, “What today’s scores tell me is not that we should be celebrating,” but instead “that New York State needs to raise its standards.”

The inescapable, and deeply disturbing, implication is that “high standards” really means “standards that all students will never be able to meet.” If everyone did meet them, the standards would just be ratcheted up again — as high as necessary to ensure that some students failed. The standards-and-accountability movement is not about leaving no child behind. To the contrary, it is an elaborate sorting device, intended to separate wheat from chaff.

The fact that students of color, students from low-income families and students whose first language isn’t English are disproportionately defined as chaff makes the whole enterprise even more insidious.

But my little thought experiment uncovers a truth that extends well beyond what has been done to our schools in the name of “raising the bar.” We have been taught to respond with suspicion whenever all members of any group are successful. That’s true even when we have no reason to believe that corners have been cut. In America, excellence is regarded as a scarce commodity. Success doesn’t count unless it is attained by only a few. ...

The goal, in other words, isn’t to do well but to defeat other people who are also trying to do well... A school’s ultimate mission, apparently, is not to help everyone learn but to rig the game so that there will always be losers.

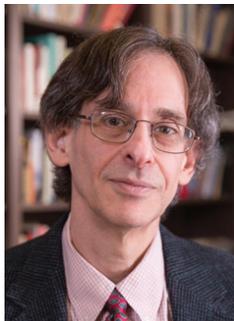
This makes no sense in any context. Perhaps, for example, we can justify rating states or nations based on the quality of their air, health care or schools, but ranking them is foolish. Relative performance tells us nothing of interest because all of them may be shamefully low — or impressively high — on whatever measure we’re using. ...

But boy, do we love to rank. Worse, we create artificial scarcity by giving out awards — distinctions manufactured out of thin air specifically so that some cannot get them.

Framing excellence in these competitive terms doesn’t lead to improvements in performance. Indeed, a consistent body of social science research shows that competition tends to hold us back from doing our best. It creates an adversarial mentality that makes productive collaboration less likely, encourages gaming of the system and leads all concerned to focus not on meaningful improvement but on trying to outdo (and perhaps undermine) everyone else.

Most of all, it encourages the false belief that excellence is a zero-sum game. It would be both more sensible and more democratic to rescue the essence of the concept: Everyone may not succeed, but at least in theory all of us could.

This column, printed recently in the New York Times, is abridged from the original because of space limitations.



ALFIE KOHN