



# FEEL-BAD EDUCATION

AND OTHER CONTRARIAN ESSAYS  
ON CHILDREN AND SCHOOLING

ALFIE KOHN

"Kohn cuts against the grain and takes on adversaries without fear, and yet with a mature and rational sophistication."

—JONATHAN KOZOL

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And Other Contrarian Essays on Children and Schooling

Alfie Kohn

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To the memory—and enduring legacy—of two thinkers who have influenced so many of us: Ted Sizer (1932–2009) and Jerry Bracey (1940–2009)

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# Introduction. “Well, Duh!”: Obvious Truths That We Shouldn’t Be

## Ignoring

The field of education bubbles over with controversies. It’s not unusual for intelligent people of good will to disagree passionately about what should happen in schools. Sometimes these disagreements result from how the available evidence is interpreted, and sometimes they’re due to divergent visions regarding the purpose of schooling or what constitutes an ideal society.

But there are certain precepts that aren’t really debatable—that just about anyone would have to acknowledge are true. While many such statements are banal, I want to argue that some are worth noticing, because in our school practices and policies, we tend to ignore the implications that follow from them. It’s both intellectually interesting and practically important to explore such contradictions: *If we all agree that a given principle is true, then why in the world do our schools still function as if it weren’t?* I’ll identify about a dozen examples of this phenomenon, mindful that it won’t be possible to explore all the specific issues—and more controversial implications—that are entangled within them. Not so coincidentally, many of these questions anticipate the very topics that are explored later in this book.

I should also mention that several thinkers whose work I admire were kind enough to add to my “duh” list. I wasn’t able to use all their suggestions, but many stimulated my thinking about the items that I did include and helped me to reframe them.<sup>1</sup> In any case, the hazard of creating such a list is that “Duh” will inevitably become “D’oh!” as more examples come to mind immediately after it’s sent off to the printer. You, meanwhile, will undoubtedly think of still others, some of which may be even more obvious.

**1. Much of the material that students are required to memorize is soon forgotten.** The truth of this statement will be conceded (either willingly or reluctantly) by just about everyone who has spent time in school—in other words, all of us. A few months, or sometimes even just a few days, after having committed a list of facts, dates, or definitions to memory, we couldn’t recall most of them if our lives depended on it.

Everyone knows this, yet a substantial part of schooling—particularly in the most traditional schools—continues to consist of stuffing facts into students’ short-term memories. Instruction and assessment are largely geared to “the forced ingestion of facts and data,” even though this is “useless for educational purposes,” as literacy expert Frank Smith has written. “What we remember from fruitless efforts to memorize are the stress and the failure inevitably involved.”<sup>2</sup>

The more closely we inspect this model of teaching and testing, the more problematic it reveals itself to be. First, there’s the question of *what* students are made to learn, which often is more oriented to factual material than to a deep understanding of ideas. (For more on this, see item #2 below.) Second, there’s the question of *how* students are taught, with a focus on passive absorption rather than active meaning-making: listening to lectures, reading predigested summaries in textbooks, and rehearsing material immediately before being required to cough it back up. Third, there’s the question of *why* a student has learned something: Knowledge is less likely to be retained if it has been acquired so that one will perform well on a test, as opposed to learning in the context of pursuing projects and solving problems that are personally meaningful.

Even without these layers of deficiencies with the status quo, and even if we grant that remembering some things can be useful, the fundamental question echoes like a shout down an endless school corridor: Why are kids still being forced to memorize so much stuff that we know

they won't remember?

~~Corollary 1a: Because this appears to be true for adults, too, why do most “professional development” events for teachers resemble the least impressive classrooms, with experts disgorging facts about how to educate?~~

2. **Just knowing a lot of facts doesn't mean that one is smart.** Even students who do manage to remember some of the factual material that they were taught are not necessarily able to make sense of those bits of knowledge, to understand connections among them, or to apply them in inventive and persuasive ways to real-life problems. To cite an old adage (which was also cited approvingly by Albert Einstein): “Education is that which remains if one has forgotten everything he learned in school.”<sup>3</sup> Words like “smart” and “intelligent” are routinely used to describe people who merely know a lot of facts, yet I think most people will admit that there's a difference.

In fact, the cognitive scientist Lauren Resnick goes even further: It's not just that knowing (or having been taught) facts doesn't in itself make you smart. A mostly fact-oriented education may actually *interfere* with your becoming smart. “Thinking skills tend to be driven out of the curriculum by ever-growing demands for teaching larger and larger bodies of knowledge,” she writes.<sup>4</sup> Yet schools continue to treat students as empty glasses into which information can be poured—and public officials continue to judge schools on the basis of how efficiently and determinedly they pour.

3. **If kids have different talents, interests, and ways of learning, it's probably not ideal to teach all of them the same things—or in the same way.** It's tempting to assume that one-size-fits-all instruction persists only because there are too many students in each classroom for teachers to customize what, or how, they're teaching. This explanation, however, doesn't quite match reality.

First, some teachers manage to adjust the curriculum to the needs of each student quite effectively despite class sizes far greater than would be ideal.<sup>5</sup> Second, many people seem to value uniformity and consistency in teaching—or overlook the significance of differences among students—to the point that a lockstep curriculum and a single set of (usually traditional) teaching strategies are used even when this is avoidable. Lots of teachers will do pretty much the same thing next year that they did this year, even though they're teaching different students. Many schools insist on “aligning” the curriculum so that what's being taught in all the fifth-grade classrooms is virtually identical. (The degree of predictability that this arrangement ensures is convenient for the sixth-grade teachers who will inherit these kids, but why should that consideration trump what's best for the kids themselves?) Finally, policy makers mandate a uniform set of standards and curriculum topics for all students of the same age across a district, across a state, and now, it appears, throughout the entire country (see chapter 15, “Debunking the Case for National Standards”). Most of us understand on some level that one size is more likely to thwart than to fit all, yet education policies proceed as if that weren't the case.

4. **Students are more likely to learn what they find interesting.** There's no shortage of evidence for this claim if you really need it. One of many examples: A group of researchers found that children's level of interest in a passage they were reading was *thirty times* more useful than its difficulty level for predicting how much of it they would later remember.<sup>6</sup> But this should be obvious, if only because of what we know about ourselves. It's the tasks that intrigue us, that tap our curiosity and connect to the things we care about, that we tend to keep doing—and get better at doing. So, too, for kids.

Conversely, students are less likely to benefit from doing what they hate. Medicine may work on the body regardless of your attitude about taking it,<sup>7</sup> but that's not true with education.

Psychology has come a long way from the days when theorists tried to reduce everything to simple stimulus-response pairings. We know now that people aren't machines, such that an input (listening to a lecture, reading a textbook, filling out a worksheet) will reliably yield an output (learning). What matters is how people *experience* what they do, what meaning they ascribe to it, and what their attitudes and goals are. Thus, if students find an academic task stressful or boring, they're far less likely to understand, or even remember, the content. And if they're uninterested in a whole category of academic tasks—say, those that they're assigned to do when they get home after having spent a whole day at school—then they aren't likely to benefit much from doing them. No wonder research finds little, if any, advantage to homework, particularly in elementary or middle school.<sup>8</sup>

Sure, some things have to be done even though they're not much fun. But quality of life improves when people of any age have more opportunities to do what they find interesting, and so does their productivity. So why does students' level of interest in what they're doing have so little impact on education policy despite its obvious connection to achievement?

**Corollary 4a:** If a certain approach to teaching left most of *us* bored and unenlightened, we probably shouldn't teach another generation the same way. As far as I can tell, the vast majority of adults were themselves children at one point or another. So why do educators subject kids—and why do parents allow their kids to be subjected—to the stuff that we found barely tolerable? Have we forgotten what it was like? Or do we, for lack of empathy, regard the lectures, worksheets, tests, grades, and homework as a rite of passage?

**5. Students are less interested in whatever they're forced to do and more enthusiastic when they have some say.** Once again, it's true for you, it's true for me, it's true for people who spend their days in classrooms and in workplaces. Once again, studies confirm what we already know from experience (see chapter 6, "How to Create Nonreaders"). The nearly universal negative reaction to compulsion, like the positive response to choice, is a function of our psychological makeup.

Now combine this point with the preceding one: If choice is related to interest, and interest is related to achievement, then it's not much of a stretch to suggest that the learning environments in which kids get to participate in making decisions about what they're doing are likely to be the most effective, all else being equal. Yet such learning environments continue to be vastly outnumbered by those where kids spend most of their time just following directions.

**6. Just because doing X raises standardized test scores doesn't mean X should be done.** At the very least, we would need evidence that the test in question is a source of useful information about whether our teaching and learning goals are being met. Many educators have argued that the tests being used in our schools are unsatisfactory because of (a) limitations with specific tests; (b) features shared by *most* tests, such as the fact that they're timed (which places more of a premium on speed than on thoughtfulness), norm-referenced (which means the tests are designed to tell us who's beating whom, not how well students have learned or teachers have taught), and consist largely of multiple-choice questions (which don't permit students to generate or even explain their answers); or (c) problems inherent to *all* tests that are standardized and created by people far away from the classroom, as opposed to assessing the actual learning taking place there on an ongoing basis.

This is not the place to explain in detail why standardized tests measure what matters least.<sup>9</sup> Here, I want only to make the simpler—and, once again, I think, indisputable—point that anyone who regards high or rising test scores as good news has an obligation to show that the tests themselves are good—in other words, that they really tap the proficiencies we care about, that students and schools we admire based on solid criteria also do well on these tests, and that when

one school's score is higher than another's, we're certain that the difference is both statistically and practically significant (and can't be explained by other variables such as socioeconomic status).

If a test result *can't* be convincingly shown to be both valid and meaningful, then whatever we did to achieve that result—say, a new curriculum or instructional strategy—may well have no merit whatsoever. It may even prove to be destructive when assessed by better criteria. Indeed, a school might be getting worse even as its test scores rise.

So how is it that articles in newspapers and education journals, as well as pronouncements by public officials and think tanks, seem to accept on faith that better scores on *any* test necessarily constitute good news, and that whatever produced those scores can be described as “effective”? Flip through any issue of *Education Week* and you will see multiple illustrations: This reading program has produced “promising results”; that state has experienced stagnant “achievement”; certain school districts are “outperforming” others—and in every single case, the people being quoted (and those doing the quoting) are relying on the validity of the standardized tests on which these evaluations are based, almost never pausing to question, defend, or even acknowledge the significance of this reliance.

**Corollary 6a:** The more time spent teaching students how to do well on a particular test—familiarizing them with its content and format—the less meaningful the results of that test. What those results mostly tell us is how well students were prepared for *that test*, not what knowledge and skills they have in general. (The scores may not even predict how well students will do on other, apparently similar, standardized tests.) Every expert in the field of educational measurement knows this is true, yet administrators continue to encourage, if not demand, a test-oriented curriculum. Astute parents and other observers will then ask, “How much time was sacrificed from real learning just so kids could get better at taking the [name of test]?”

**7. Students are more likely to succeed in a place where they feel known and cared about.** I realize that there are people whose impulse is to sneer when talk turns to how kids feel, and who dismiss as “soft” or “faddish” anything other than old-fashioned instruction of academic skills. But even these hard-liners, when pressed, are unable to deny the relationship between feeling and thinking, between a child's comfort level and his or her capacity to learn.

Here, too, there are loads of supporting data. As one group of researchers put it, “In order to promote students' academic performance in the classroom, educators should also promote their social and emotional adjustment.”<sup>10</sup> And yet, broadly speaking, we don't. Teachers and schools are evaluated almost exclusively on academic achievement measures (which, to make matters worse, mostly amount to standardized test scores). If we took seriously the need for kids to feel known and cared about, our discussions about the distinguishing features of a “good school” would sound very different, and our view of discipline and classroom management would be turned inside out, seeing as how the primary goals of most such strategies are obedience and order, often with the result that kids feel *less* cared about by adults—or even bullied by them.

**Corollary 7a:** Students are more likely to succeed when they're healthy and well-fed. Fourteen million American children live in families whose income falls below the official poverty line, and another 16 million live in families classified as low-income.<sup>11</sup> Can anyone possibly doubt the impact that hunger and inadequate health care have on academic achievement?<sup>12</sup> Is there a more striking example of the disparity between what we know and what we do?

**8. We want children to develop in many ways, not just academically.** Even mainstream education groups, averse to challenging widely accepted premises about instruction and assessment, have embraced



the idea of teaching the “whole child.” It’s a safe position, really, because just about every parent or educator will tell you that we should be supporting children’s physical, emotional, social, moral, and artistic growth, as well as their intellectual growth.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it’s obvious to most people that the schools can and should play a key role in promoting many different forms of development. In a survey of more than 1,100 Americans, for example, 71 percent said they thought that it was even more important for the schools to teach values than to teach academic subjects<sup>14</sup>—although of course this doesn’t mean that everyone will agree on what those values should be.

If we acknowledge that academics is just one facet of a good education, why do so few conversations about improving our schools deal with—and why are so few resources devoted to—nonacademic issues? And why do we assign children still more academic tasks after the school day is over, even when those tasks cut into the time that children have to pursue interests that will help them develop in other ways?

**Corollary 8a:** Students “learn best when they are happy,”<sup>15</sup> but that doesn’t mean they’re especially likely to be happy (or psychologically healthy) just because they’re academically successful. And millions aren’t. Imagine how high schools would have to be changed if we were to take this realization seriously.

**9. Just because a lesson (or book, or class, or test) is harder doesn’t mean it’s better.** First, if it’s pointless to give students things to do that are too easy, it’s also counterproductive to give them things that they experience as too hard. Second, and more important, this criterion overlooks a variety of considerations other than difficulty level by which educational quality might be evaluated. We know this, yet we continue to worship at the altar of “rigor.” I’ve seen lessons that aren’t unduly challenging yet are deeply engaging and intellectually valuable. Conversely, I’ve seen courses—and whole schools—that are indisputably rigorous . . . and appallingly bad.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, difficulty level can be seen not only as a cause but also as an effect. And that leads us to . . .

**Corollary 9a:** The more pressure students feel to succeed, the more likely they’ll be to choose easy tasks. After all, the easier the task, the higher the probability that it can be done successfully. The paradox is profound: Some of the same people who love to talk about “rigor” and “raising the bar” have created schools that are all about succeeding, performing, achieving (rather than *learning*), and that very focus leads students to do whatever’s easiest.<sup>17</sup>

**10. Kids aren’t just short adults.** Over the last hundred years, developmental psychologists have labored to describe what makes children distinctive and what they can understand at certain ages. There are limits, after all, to what even a precocious younger child can grasp (e.g., the way metaphors function, the significance of making a promise) or do (e.g., keep still for an extended period). Likewise, there are certain things children require for optimal development, including opportunities to play and explore, alone and with others. Research fills in—and keeps fine-tuning—the details, but the fundamental implication isn’t hard to grasp: How we educate kids should follow from what defines them *as kids*.

Once again, though, our practices and policies deviate alarmingly from what most people acknowledge to be true in the abstract. Developmentally inappropriate education has become the norm, as kindergarten (literally, the “children’s garden”) now tends to resemble a first- or second-grade classroom—in fact, a *bad* first- or second-grade classroom, where discovery, creativity, and social interaction are replaced by a repetitive regimen focused on narrowly defined academic skills.

More generally, premature exposure to sit-still-and-listen instruction, homework, grades, tests, and competition—practices that are clearly a bad match for younger children and of questionable value at any age—is rationalized by invoking a notion I’ve called BGUTI: Better Get Used to It. The logic here is that we have to prepare you for the bad things that are going to be done to you later . . . by doing them to you now (see chapter 3, “Getting Hit on the Head Lessons”). When articulated explicitly, that principle sounds exactly as ridiculous as it is. Nevertheless, it’s the engine that continues to drive an awful lot of nonsense.

The deeply obvious premise that we should respect what makes children children can be amended to include a related principle that is less obvious to some people: Learning something earlier isn’t necessarily better. Deborah Meier, whose experience as a celebrated educator ranges from kindergarten to high school, put it bluntly: “The earlier [that schools try] to inculcate so-called ‘academic’ skills, the deeper the damage and the more permanent the ‘achievement’ gap.”<sup>18</sup> That is exactly what a passel of ambitious research projects has found: A traditional skills-based approach to teaching young children—particularly those from low-income families—not only offers no lasting benefits but appears to be harmful.<sup>19</sup>

Another kind of evidence comes from Finland, whose impressive results on international comparisons in several academic fields have lately attracted intense interest. Most of what’s striking about that country’s education policy poses a direct challenge to the conventional wisdom that defines U.S. schooling: Standardized tests are used sparingly, students of different ability levels are taught together rather than tracked, and homework is uncommon. Any of these features might be contributing to Finland’s success.<sup>20</sup> But it’s particularly interesting that kids there don’t start school until they’re seven years old, and preschool begins only one year before that. During that preschool year, moreover, “children are encouraged to play with language and numbers,” but “there is no formal teaching of basic academic skills.”<sup>21</sup> From all indications, Finland succeeds because of, not in spite of, that fact.

**Corollary 10a:** Kids aren’t just *future* adults. They are that, of course, but they aren’t only that, because children’s needs and perspectives are worth attending to in their own right. We violate this precept—and do a disservice to children—whenever we talk about schooling in economic terms, treating students mostly as future employees (see chapter 13, “Against ‘Competitiveness’”). Which reminds us of another unarguable fact. . . .

**11. Education policies that benefit (or appeal to) large corporations aren’t necessarily good for children.** I say “aren’t necessarily” to ensure that this item qualifies for a place on the “duh” list. Replace that phrase with “often aren’t” and I believe the claim is still true, even though it would then be contestable. Some years ago I made an observation so obvious that it should have been prefaced with the phrase “needless to say,” but current developments in U.S. education reform suggest that it needs to be said again:

Corporations in our economic system exist to provide a financial return to the people who own them: They are in business to make a profit. As individuals, those who work in (or even run) these companies might have other goals, too, when they turn their attention to public policy or education or anything else. But business *qua* business is concerned principally about its own bottom line. Thus, when business thinks about schools, its agenda is driven by what will maximize its profitability, not necessarily by what is in the best interest of students. Any overlap between those two goals would be purely accidental—and, in practice, turns out to be minimal. What maximizes corporate profits often does not benefit children, and vice

versa. Qualities such as a love of learning for its own sake, a penchant for asking challenging questions, or a commitment to democratic participation in decision making would be seen as nice but irrelevant—or perhaps even as impediments to the efficient realization of corporate goals.<sup>22</sup>

To say this is not in itself to criticize those corporate goals, but merely to observe that the people who pursue them should not enjoy a privileged status when it comes to formulating education policy.

**12. Substance matters more than labels.** A skunk cabbage by any other name would smell as putrid. But in education, as in other domains, we're often seduced by appealing names when we should be demanding to know exactly what lies behind them. Most of us, for example, favor a sense of community, prefer that a job be done by professionals, and want to promote learning. So should we sign on to the work being done in the name of "Professional Learning Communities"? Not if it turns out that PLCs have less to do with helping children to think deeply about questions that matter than with boosting standardized test scores.<sup>23</sup> The same caution is appropriate when it comes to "Positive Behavior Support," a jaunty moniker for a program of crude Skinnerian manipulation in which students are essentially bribed to do whatever they're told. More broadly, even the label "school reform" doesn't necessarily signify improvement; these days, it's more likely to mean "something that skillful and caring teachers wouldn't be inclined to do unless coerced," as educator Bruce Marlowe put it.<sup>24</sup>

**Corollary 12a:** What it is matters more than when it's done. Just about anything that one happens to like can be rebranded as "twenty-first-century schooling" (or skills). It's sort of like "new and improved" except that what's being sold are books, conferences, and ideas rather than dessert toppings or floor waxes. Take the educational stuff that you regard as truly valuable—student-centered learning, critical thinking, understanding ideas from the inside out, compassion, collaboration, democracy, authentic assessment—and then ask whether any of it was (or will be) less important in a different century. When modifiers turn out to be mostly marketing ploys, it's enough to drive one to an act of satire (see chapter 14, "When Twenty-First-Century Schooling Just Isn't Good Enough").

Once we acknowledge that any given item on this list is true, we're compelled to consider its implications for both big-picture (macro) policies and little-picture (micro) practices. While the two obviously overlap—a state law that imposes high-stakes testing affects what Ms. Dewey can do tomorrow morning with her sixth graders—I've noticed that some people seem to make a lot more sense when they talk about one realm as opposed to the other.

For instance, certain scholars of cognition and pedagogy who demonstrate a keen sense of what can be done in classrooms to help children learn have enthusiastically endorsed the idea of prescriptive state (or even national) standards. Their assumption seems to be that the best and brightest theorists, using government as their instrument, ought to reach into classrooms and *make* the instruction more thoughtful. I find this at once naive and arrogant, troubling for moral as well as practical reasons. Some of these thinkers have contributed significantly to our understanding of the limits of a behaviorist model of learning—and the importance of having students construct knowledge rather than passively absorb it—but they assume that teachers' behaviors can (and should) be controlled from above, that public policy ought to be based on a model of "doing to" rather than "working with."

Conversely, consider the case of Diane Ravitch, a prominent conservative education scholar, who has undergone a conversion experience and begun to write trenchant critiques of the corporate-style version of education reform that many of us have been decrying for years: merit pay (mostly based on test results), more charter schools (which often siphon public funds to for-profit companies), less job security for teachers, and so on. But when the conversation turns to what happens *inside* classrooms, she remains steadfastly traditional. By way of analogy, imagine a health care critic who cheers progressives with her brilliant arguments for a single-payer plan and fiery, if belated, attacks on insurance companies—but, if asked what doctors should actually be doing in the examining room, waxes nostalgic for the curative value of leeches.

The essays that follow reflect what could be described as a progressive sensibility that applies to both macro and micro questions. I make a case against uniform national standards but also against the use of rubrics for evaluating kids' individual assignments; I object to using "competitiveness in a global economy" as the touchstone for formulating education policies, but I'm just as concerned about simplistic attempts to crack down on student cheating or the ideology that lies behind inspirational posters of the sort found in so many schools.

These and other positions developed in the chapters that you're about to read are obviously controversial. Yet I remain convinced that most of them, whether addressed to policy makers or teachers, derive from much more basic and widely accepted beliefs—in some cases from assertions so straightforward as to make us say, "Well, duh!"

## Notes

1. Thanks to Dick Allington, David Berliner, Marion Brady, Bruce Marlowe, Ed Miller, Nel Noddings, Susan Ohanian, Richard Rothstein, and Eric Schaps.[\[back\]](#)
2. Frank Smith, "Let's Declare Education a Disaster and Get On with Our Lives," *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 1995, p. 589.[\[back\]](#)
3. Albert Einstein, *Out of My Later Years* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 2000, orig. published 1950), p. 36.[\[back\]](#)
4. Lauren B. Resnick, *Education and Learning to Think* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1987), p. 48. The psychoanalyst Erich Fromm put it this way: "The pathetic superstition prevails that by knowing more and more facts, one arrives at knowledge of reality. Hundreds of scattered and unrelated facts are dumped into the heads of students; their time and energy are taken up by learning more and more facts so that there is little left for thinking" (*Escape from Freedom* [New York: Avon Books, 1965, orig. published 1946], p. 273).[\[back\]](#)
5. The usual term for this is "differentiation," but it's important to distinguish between on the one hand, a commitment to working with students individually to create projects that reflect their interests, strengths, and needs, and, on the other hand, a behaviorist protocol in which the difficulty level of prefabricated skills-based exercises is adjusted on the basis of each student's proficiency as determined by standardized test scores.[\[back\]](#)

6. Richard C. Anderson et al., “Interestingness of Children’s Reading Material,” in *Aptitude, Learning, and Instruction*, vol. 3: *Conative and Affective Process Analyses*, eds. Richard E. Snow and Marshall J. Farr (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1987).[\[back\]](#)
7. For the sake of argument, we’ll ignore some intriguing findings from the field of mind-body connections that have the effect of raising questions about even this assumption.[\[back\]](#)
8. See Alfie Kohn, *The Homework Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2006), especially chapters 2 and 3.[\[back\]](#)
9. *This is the place*: Alfie Kohn, *The Case Against Standardized Testing: Raising the Scores, Ruining the Schools* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000). For a list of books on the subject by other authors, see [www.alfiekohn.org/standards/resources.htm](http://www.alfiekohn.org/standards/resources.htm). Also see the resources at [www.fairtest.org](http://www.fairtest.org).[\[back\]](#)
10. Lisa Flook, Rena L. Repetti, and Jodie B. Ullman, “Classroom Social Experiences as Predictors of Academic Performance,” *Developmental Psychology* 41 (2005): 326. This particular study focused on the academic relevance of peer acceptance and social relations, but other research has found similar academic benefits from a feeling of “classroom belonging,” which includes being accepted by the teacher (Carol Goodenow, “Classroom Belonging Among Early Adolescent Students: Relationship to Motivation and Achievement,” *Journal of Early Adolescence* 13 [1993]: 21–43); the extent to which a classroom or school feels to students like a “community” (Victor Battistich et al., “Schools as Communities, Poverty Levels of Student Populations, and Students’ Attitudes, Motives, and Performance,” *American Educational Research Journal* 32 [1995]: 627–58); and attending to students’ social and emotional needs more generally (Joseph E. Zins et al., eds., *Building Academic Success on Social and Emotional Learning: What Does the Research Say?* [New York: Teachers College Press, 2004]; and Catherine Gewertz, “Hand in Hand,” *Education Week*, September 3, 2003, pp. 38–41). At the same time, it’s important to keep in mind that caring, like the chance to make decisions and to do interesting things, is an end in itself, not merely a means of boosting academic performance.[\[back\]](#)
11. See publications by the National Center for Children in Poverty ([www.nccp.org](http://www.nccp.org)).[\[back\]](#)
12. For a good summary, see Richard Rothstein, “Equalizing Opportunity,” *American Educator*, Summer 2009, pp. 4–7, 45–46. Elsewhere, Rothstein suggests that schools might raise achievement more by making sure children had access to dental and vision clinics than from changing instruction (“Reforms That Could Help Narrow the Achievement Gap,” *Policy Perspectives*, p. 5; available at [www.wested.org/online\\_pubs/pp-06-02.pdf](http://www.wested.org/online_pubs/pp-06-02.pdf)).[\[back\]](#)
13. What’s more, even a desire to promote *intellectual* growth doesn’t necessarily

translate into support for what we commonly think of as an *academic* agenda. In many of her writings, early-childhood expert Lilian Katz has distinguished between engaging children's minds and deepening their understanding of themselves, on the one hand, and the more circumscribed skills associated with a focus on academic achievement, on the other.[\[back\]](#)

14. Jean Johnson and John Immerwahr, *First Things First: What Americans Expect from Public Schools* (New York: Public Agenda, 1994). In a Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll with about the same sample size, meanwhile, when respondents were asked what "the local public schools should give the main emphasis to," 39 percent chose "academic skills of students," while 59 percent chose one of the other two options: "ability of students to take responsibility" or "ability of students to work with others" (Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, "The 31st Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 1999, p. 51).[\[back\]](#)
15. This reminder from education philosopher Nel Noddings is quoted in chapter 12 of this book ("Feel-Bad Education").[\[back\]](#)
16. For more on this topic, see my article "Confusing Harder with Better," *Education Week*, September 15, 1999, pp. 68, 52, which appears as a chapter in *What Does It Mean to Be Well Educated?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004) and is available at [www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/edweek/chwb.htm](http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/edweek/chwb.htm).[\[back\]](#)
17. For more, see my book *The Schools Our Children Deserve* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), chapter 2.[\[back\]](#)
18. Deborah Meier, "What I've Learned," in *Those Who Dared*, ed. Carl Glickman (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009), p. 12.[\[back\]](#)
19. One study, for example, found that young children subjected to "Direct Instruction" (DI) were subsequently less likely to graduate from high school than those who experienced a more developmentally appropriate form of teaching. Another study found that DI children ended up with more social and psychological signs of trouble later on and were less likely to read books. See Kohn, *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, pp. 213–17. This section is also available at [www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/ece.htm](http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/ece.htm).[\[back\]](#)
20. Also possibly relevant: the fact that Finland is a small, mostly homogeneous country with egalitarian sensibilities and an institutionalized respect for teachers.[\[back\]](#)
21. Kaisa Aunola and Jari-Erik Nurmi, "Maternal Affection Moderates the Impact of Psychological Control on a Child's Mathematical Performance," *Developmental Psychology* 40 (2004): 968. Also see Ellen Gamerman, "What Makes Finnish Kids So Smart?" *Wall Street Journal*, February 29, 2008 (available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120425355065601997.html>).[\[back\]](#)
22. Alfie Kohn, "The 500-Pound Gorilla," *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 2002, p. 118 (available at [www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/500pound.htm](http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/500pound.htm)).[\[back\]](#)

23. For more, see my essay “Turning Children into Data: A Skeptic’s Guide to Assessment Programs,” *Education Week*, August 25, 2010 (available at [www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/edweek/data.htm](http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/edweek/data.htm)).[\[back\]](#)
24. Bruce Marlowe, personal communication, May 2010. Also see my comments on the uses to which the phrase “school reform” is put, in “Test Today, Privatize Tomorrow,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2004, pp. 569–77 (available at [www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/testtoday.htm](http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/testtoday.htm)); and in “Beware School ‘Reformers,’” *Nation*, December 29, 2008, pp. 7–8 (available at [www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/soe.htm](http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/soe.htm)).[\[back\]](#)

# One: Progressivism and Beyond

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# 1. Progressive Education: Why It's Hard to Beat, But Also Hard to Find

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If progressive education doesn't lend itself to a single fixed definition, that seems fitting in light of its reputation for resisting conformity and standardization. Any two educators who describe themselves as sympathetic to this tradition may well see it differently, or at least disagree about which features are the most important.

Talk to enough progressive educators, in fact, and you'll begin to notice certain paradoxes: Some people focus on the unique needs of individual students, while others invoke the importance of a *community* of learners; some describe learning as a process, more journey than destination, while others believe that tasks should result in authentic products that can be shared.<sup>1</sup>

## What It Is

Despite such variations, there are enough elements on which most of us can agree so that a common core of progressive education emerges, however hazily. And it really does make sense to call it a *tradition*, as I did a moment ago. Ironically, what we usually call "traditional" education, in contrast to the progressive approach, has less claim to that adjective—because of how, and how recently, it has developed. As Jim Nehring at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell observed, "Progressive schools are the legacy of a long and proud tradition of thoughtful school practice stretching back for centuries"—including hands-on learning, multiage classrooms, and mentor-apprentice relationships—while what we generally refer to as traditional schooling "is largely the result of outdated policy changes that have calcified into conventions."<sup>2</sup> (Nevertheless, I'll use the conventional nomenclature in this article to avoid confusion.)

It's not all or nothing, to be sure. I don't think I've ever seen a school—even one with scripted instruction, uniforms, and rows of desks bolted to the floor—that has completely escaped the influence of progressive ideas. Nor have I seen a school that's progressive in every detail. Still, schools can be characterized according to how closely they reflect a commitment to values such as these:

**Attending to the whole child:** Progressive educators are concerned with helping children become not only good learners but also good people. Schooling isn't seen as being about just academics, nor is intellectual growth limited to verbal and mathematical proficiencies.

**Community:** Learning isn't something that happens to individual children—separate selves at separate desks. Children learn with and from one another in a caring community, and that's true of moral as well as academic learning. Interdependence counts at least as much as independence, so it follows that practices that pit students against one another in some kind of competition, thereby undermining a feeling of community, are deliberately avoided.

**Collaboration:** Progressive schools are characterized by what I like to call a "working with" rather than a "doing to" model. In place of rewards for complying with the adults' expectations, or punitive consequences for failing to do so, there's more of an emphasis on collaborative problem-solving—and, for that matter, less focus on behaviors than on underlying motives, values, and

reasons.

**Social justice:** A sense of community and responsibility for others isn't confined to the classroom; indeed, students are helped to locate themselves in widening circles of care that extend beyond self, beyond friends, beyond their own ethnic group, and beyond their own country. Opportunities are offered not only to learn about, but also to put into action, a commitment to diversity and to improving the lives of others.

**Intrinsic motivation:** When considering (or reconsidering) educational policies and practices, the first question that progressive educators are likely to ask is, "What's the effect on students' *interest* in learning, their desire to continue reading, thinking, and questioning?" This deceptively simple test helps to determine what students will and won't be asked to do. Thus, conventional practices, including homework, grades, and tests, prove difficult to justify for anyone who is serious about promoting long-term dispositions rather than just improving short-term skills.

**Deep understanding:** As the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead declared long ago, "A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God's earth." Facts and skills do matter, but only *in a context* and *for a purpose*. That's why progressive education tends to be organized around problems, projects, and questions—rather than around lists of facts, skills, and separate disciplines. The teaching is typically interdisciplinary, the assessment rarely focuses on rote memorization, and excellence isn't confused with "rigor." The point is not merely to challenge students—after all, harder is not necessarily better—but to invite them to think deeply about issues that matter and help them understand ideas from the inside out

**Active learning:** In progressive schools, students play a vital role in helping to design the curriculum, formulate the questions, seek out (and create) answers, think through possibilities, and evaluate how successful they—and their teachers—have been. Their active participation in every stage of the process is consistent with the overwhelming consensus of experts that learning is a matter of constructing ideas rather than passively absorbing information or practicing skills.

**Taking kids seriously:** In traditional schooling, as John Dewey once remarked, "the center of gravity is outside the child": he or she is expected to adjust to the school's rules and curriculum. Progressive educators take their cue from the children—and are particularly attentive to differences among them. (Each student is unique, so a single set of policies, expectations, or assignments would be as counterproductive as it was disrespectful.) The curriculum isn't just based on interest, but on *these children's* interests. Naturally, teachers will have broadly conceived themes and objectives in mind, but they don't just design a course of study *for* their students; they design it *with* them, and they welcome unexpected detours. One fourth-grade teacher's curriculum, therefore, won't be the same as that of the teacher next door, nor will her curriculum be the same this year as it was for the children she taught last year. It's not enough to offer elaborate thematic units prefabricated by the adults. And progressive educators realize that the students must help to formulate not only the course of study but also the outcomes or standards that inform those lessons.

Some of the features that I've listed here will seem objectionable, or at least unsettling, to educators at more traditional schools, while others will be surprisingly familiar and may even echo sentiments that they, themselves, have expressed. But progressive educators don't merely say they endorse ideas like "love of learning" or "a sense of community." They're willing to put these values into practice even if doing so requires them to up-end traditions. They may eliminate homework altogether if it's clear that students view after-school assignments as something to be gotten over with as soon as possible. They will question things like honors classes and awards

assemblies that clearly undermine a sense of community. Progressive schools, in short, follow their core values—bolstered by research and experience—wherever they lead.

## What It Isn't

Misconceptions about progressive education generally take two forms. Either it is defined too narrowly so that the significance of the change it represents is understated, or else an exaggerated, caricatured version is presented in order to justify dismissing the whole approach. Let's take each of these in turn.

Individualized attention from caring, respectful teachers is terribly important. But it does not a progressive school make. To assume otherwise not only dilutes progressivism; it's unfair to traditional educators, most of whom are not callous Gradgrinds or ruler-wielding nuns. In fact, it's perfectly consistent to view education as the process of filling children up with bits of knowledge—and to use worksheets, lectures, quizzes, homework, grades, and other such methods in pursuit of that goal—while being genuinely concerned about each child's progress. Schools with warm, responsive teachers who know each student personally can take pride in that fact, but they shouldn't claim on that basis to be progressive.

Moreover, traditional schools aren't always about memorizing dates and definitions; sometimes they're also committed to helping students understand ideas. As one science teacher pointed out, "For thoughtful traditionalists, thinking is couched in terms of comprehending, integrating, and applying knowledge." However, the student's task in such classrooms is "comprehending how the *teacher* has integrated or applied the ideas . . . and [then] reconstruct[ing] the teacher's thinking."<sup>3</sup> There are interesting concepts being discussed in some traditional classrooms, in other words, but what distinguishes progressive education is that students must *construct* their own understanding of ideas.

There's another mistake based on too narrow a definition, which took me a while to catch on to: A school that is culturally progressive is not necessarily educationally progressive. An institution can be steeped in lefty politics and multi-grain values; it can be committed to diversity, peace, and saving the planet—but remain strikingly traditional in its pedagogy. In fact, one can imagine an old-fashioned pour-in-the-facts approach being used to teach lessons in tolerance or even radical politics.<sup>4</sup>

Less innocuous, or accidental, is the tendency to paint progressive education as a touchy-feely, loosey-goosey, fluffy, fuzzy, undemanding exercise in leftover hippie idealism—or Rousseauvian Romanticism. In this cartoon version of the tradition, kids are free to do anything they please, the curriculum can consist of whatever is fun (and nothing that isn't fun). Learning is thought to happen automatically while the teachers just stand by, observing and beaming. I lack the space here to offer examples of this sort of misrepresentation—or a full account of why it's so profoundly wrong—but trust me: People really do sneer at the idea of progressive education based on an image that has little to do with progressive education.

## Why It Makes Sense

For most people, the fundamental reason to choose, or offer, a progressive education is a function of their basic values: "a rock-bottom commitment to democracy," as Joseph Featherstone put it; a belief that meeting children's needs should take precedence over preparing future employees; and a desire to nourish curiosity, creativity, compassion, skepticism, and other virtues.

Fortunately, what may have begun with values (for any of us as individuals, and also for

education itself, historically speaking) has turned out to be supported by solid data. A truly impressive collection of research has demonstrated that when students are able to spend more time thinking about ideas than memorizing facts and practicing skills—and when they are invited to help direct their own learning—they are not only more likely to enjoy what they’re doing but to do it better. Progressive education isn’t just more appealing; it’s also more productive.

I reviewed decades’ worth of research in the late 1990s: studies of preschools and high schools; studies of instruction in reading, writing, math, and science; broad studies of “open classrooms,” “student-centered” education, and teaching consistent with constructivist accounts of learning, but also investigations of specific innovations like democratic classrooms, multiage instruction, looping, cooperative learning, and authentic assessment (including the abolition of grades). Across domains, the results overwhelmingly favor progressive education. Regardless of one’s values, in other words, this approach can be recommended purely on the basis of its effectiveness. And if your criteria are more ambitious—long-term retention of what’s been taught, the capacity to understand ideas and apply them to new kinds of problems, a desire to continue learning—the relative benefits of progressive education are even greater.<sup>5</sup> This conclusion is only strengthened by the *lack* of data to support the value of standardized tests, homework, conventional discipline (based on rewards or consequences), competition, and other traditional practices.<sup>6</sup>

Since I published that research review, similar findings have continued to accumulate. Several newer studies confirm that traditional academic instruction for very young children is counterproductive.<sup>7</sup> Students in elementary and middle school did better in science when their teaching was “centered on projects in which they took a high degree of initiative. Traditional activities, such as completing worksheets and reading primarily from textbooks, seemed to have no positive effect.”<sup>8</sup> Another recent study found that an “inquiry-based” approach to learning is more beneficial than conventional methods for low-income and minority students.<sup>9</sup> The results go on and on.<sup>10</sup>

### Why It’s Rare

Despite the fact that all schools can be located on a continuum stretching between the poles of totally progressive and totally traditional—or, actually, on a series of continuums reflecting the various components of those models—it’s usually possible to visit a school and come away with a pretty clear sense of whether it can be classified as predominantly progressive. It’s also possible to reach a conclusion about how many schools—or even individual classrooms—in America merit that label: damned few. The higher the grade level, the rarer such teaching tends to be, and it’s not even all that prevalent at the lower grades.<sup>11</sup> (Also, while it’s probably true that most progressive schools are independent, most independent schools are not progressive.)

The rarity of this approach, while discouraging to some of us, is also rather significant with respect to the larger debate about education. If progressive schooling is actually quite uncommon, then it’s hard to blame our problems (real or alleged) on this model. Indeed, the facts have the effect of turning the argument on its head: If students aren’t learning effectively, it may be because of the persistence of *traditional* beliefs and practices in our nation’s schools.

But we’re also left with a question: If progressive education is so terrific, why is it still the exception rather than the rule? I often ask the people who attend my lectures to reflect on this, and the answers that come back are varied and provocative. For starters, they tell me, progressive education is not only less familiar but also much harder to do, and especially to do well. It asks a

lot more of the students and at first can seem a burden to those who have figured out how to play the ~~game in traditional classrooms—often succeeding by conventional standards without doing~~ much real thinking. It's also much more demanding of teachers, who have to know their subject matter inside and out if they want their students to “make sense of biology or literature” as opposed to “simply memoriz[ing] the frog’s anatomy or the sentence’s structure.”<sup>12</sup> But progressive teachers also have to know a lot about pedagogy because no amount of content knowledge (say, expertise in science or English) can tell you how to facilitate learning. The belief that anyone who knows enough math can teach it is a corollary of the belief that learning is a process of passive absorption—a view that cognitive science has decisively debunked.

Progressive teachers also have to be comfortable with uncertainty, not only to abandon a predictable march toward the “right answer” but to let students play an active role in the quest for meaning that replaces it. That means a willingness to give up some control and let students take some ownership, which requires guts as well as talent. These characteristics appear not to be as common as we might like to think. Almost a decade ago, I recalled my own experience in high school classrooms with some chagrin: “I prided myself on being an entertaining lecturer, very knowledgeable, funny, charismatic, and so on. It took me years to realize [that my] classroom was all about me, not about the kids. It was about teaching, not about learning.”<sup>13</sup> The more we're influenced by the insights of progressive education, the more we're forced to rethink what it means to be a good teacher. That process will unavoidably ruffle some feathers, including our own.

And speaking of feather-ruffling, I'm frequently reminded that progressive education has an uphill journey because of the larger culture we live in. It's an approach that is in some respects inherently subversive, and people in power do not always enjoy being subverted. As Vito Perrone has written, “The values of progressivism—including skepticism, questioning, challenging, openness, and seeking alternate possibilities—have long struggled for acceptance in American society. That they did not come to dominate the schools is not surprising.”<sup>14</sup>

There is pressure to raise standardized test scores, something that progressive education manages to do only sometimes and by accident—not only because that isn't its purpose but also because such tests measure what matters least. (The recognition of that fact explains why progressive schools would never dream of using standardized tests as part of their admissions process.) More insidiously, though, we face pressure to standardize our practices in general. Thinking is messy, and deep thinking is really messy. This reality coexists uneasily with demands for order—in schools where the curriculum is supposed to be carefully coordinated across grade levels and planned well ahead of time, or in society at large.

And then (as my audiences invariably point out) there are parents who have never been invited to reconsider their assumptions about education. As a result, they may be impressed by the wrong things, reassured by signs of traditionalism—letter grades, spelling quizzes, heavy textbooks, a teacher in firm control of the classroom—and unnerved by their absence. Even if their children are obviously unhappy, parents may accept that as a fact of life. Instead of wanting the next generation to get better than we got, it's as though their position was: “Listen, if it was bad enough for me, it's bad enough for my kids.” If a child is lucky enough to be in a classroom featuring, say, student-designed project-based investigations, the parent may wonder, “But is she really *learning* anything? Where are the worksheets?” And so the teachers feel pressure to make the instruction worse.

All progressive schools experience a constant undertow, perhaps a request to reintroduce

grades of some kind, to give special enrichments to the children of the “gifted” parents, to start up a competitive sports program (because American children evidently don’t get enough of winning and losing outside of school), to punish the kid who did that bad thing to my kid, to administer a standardized test or two (“just so we can see how they’re doing”), and, above all, to get the kids ready for what comes next—even if this amounts to teaching them badly so they’ll be prepared for the bad teaching to which they’ll be subjected later.<sup>15</sup>

This list doesn’t exhaust the reasons that progressive education is uncommon. However, the discussion that preceded it, of progressive education’s advantages, was also incomplete, which suggests that working to make it a little more common is a worthy pursuit. We may not be able to transform a whole school, or even a classroom, along all of these dimensions, at least not by the end of this year. But whatever progress we can make is likely to benefit our students. And doing what’s best for them is the reason all of us got into this line of work in the first place.

### **Postscript: A Dozen Questions for Progressive Schools**

Because of what I’ve described as the undertow that progressive educators inevitably experience, it’s possible for them to wake up one morning with the unsettling realization that their school has succumbed to a creeping traditionalism and drifted from the vision of its founders. Here are some pointed questions to spur collective reflection and, perhaps, corrective action.

1. Is our school committed to being *educationally* progressive, or is it content with an atmosphere that’s progressive only in the political or cultural sense of the word?

2. Is a progressive vision being pursued unapologetically, or does a fear of alienating potential applicants lead to compromising that mission and trying to be all things to all people? (“We offer a nurturing environment . . . of *rigorous* college preparation.”)

3. Is the education that the oldest students receive just as progressive as that offered to the youngest, or would a visitor conclude that those in the upper grades seem to attend a different school altogether?

4. Is the teaching organized around problems, projects, and questions? Is most of the instruction truly interdisciplinary, or is literature routinely separated from social studies—or even from spelling? Has acquiring skills (e.g., arithmetic, vocabulary) come to be over-emphasized rather than seen as a means to the end of understanding and communicating ideas?

5. To what extent are students involved in designing the curriculum? Is it a learner-centered environment, or are lessons presented to the children as *faits accomplis*? How much are students involved in other decisions, such as room decoration, classroom management, assessment, and so on? Are teachers maintaining control over children, even in subtle ways, so that the classrooms are less democratic than they could be?

6. Is assessment consistent with a progressive vision, or are students evaluated and rated with elaborate rubrics<sup>16</sup> and grade-substitutes? Do students end up, as in many traditional schools, spending so much time thinking about how well they’re doing that they’re no longer as engaged with *what* they’re doing?

7. Do administrators respect teachers’ professionalism and need for autonomy—or is there a style of top-down control that’s inconsistent with how teachers are urged to treat students? Conversely, is it possible that teachers’ insistence on being left alone has permitted them to drift from genuinely progressive practice in some areas?

8. Are educators acting like lifelong learners, always willing to question familiar ways—or do they sometimes fall back on tradition and justify practices on the grounds that something is just

“the [name of school] way”? Are teachers encouraged to visit one another’s classrooms and offered opportunities to talk about pedagogy on a regular basis?

9. Is cooperation emphasized throughout the school—or are there remnants of an adversarial approach? Do students typically make decisions by trying to reach consensus or do they simply vote? Do competitive games still dominate physical education and even show up in classrooms? Do most learning experiences take place in pairs and small groups, or does the default arrangement consist of having students do things on their own?

10. Is homework assigned only when it’s absolutely necessary to extend and enrich a lesson, or is it assigned on a regular basis (as in a traditional school)? If homework is given, are the assignments predicated on—and justified by—a behaviorist model of “reinforcing” what they were taught—or do they truly deepen students’ understanding of, and engagement with, ideas? How much of a role do the students play in making decisions about homework?

11. Does the question “How will this affect children’s *interest* in learning (and in the topic at hand)?” inform all choices about curriculum, instruction, and scheduling—or has a focus on right answers and “rigor” led some students to become less curious about, and excited by, what they’re doing?

12. Is the school as progressive and collaborative in nonacademic (social, behavioral) matters as it is in the academic realm, or are there remnants of “consequence”-based control such that the focus is sometimes more on order and compliance than on fostering moral reasoning, social skills, and democratic dispositions?

## Notes

1. The latter view is represented in both the Reggio Emilia approach to early-childhood education and in the Foxfire tradition.[\[back\]](#)
2. James H. Nehring, “Progressive vs. Traditional: Reframing an Old Debate,” *Education Week*, February 1, 2006, p. 32.[\[back\]](#)
3. Mark Windschitl, “Why We Can’t Talk to One Another About Science Education Reform,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 2006, p. 352.[\[back\]](#)
4. As I was preparing this article, a middle-school student of my acquaintance happened to tell me about a class she was taking that featured a scathing indictment of American imperialism—as well as fact-based quizzes and report cards that praised students for being “well behaved” and “on-task.”[\[back\]](#)
5. See Alfie Kohn, *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and “Tougher Standards”* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), especial Appendix A.[\[back\]](#)
6. I’ve tackled each of these issues in separate books. See the sources cited in, respectively, *The Case Against Standardized Testing* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000), *The Homework Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006), *Beyond Discipline*, rev. ed. (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2006), and *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992). Still other research exists to challenge

assumptions about the benefits of specific practices ranging from school uniforms to explicit instruction in grammar.[\[back\]](#)

7. See the addendum to “Early-Childhood Education: The Case Against Direct Instruction of Academic Skills” at [www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/ece.htm](http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/ece.htm).[\[back\]](#)
8. Harold Wenglinsky, “Facts or Critical Thinking Skills?” *Educational Leadership*, September 2004, p. 33.[\[back\]](#)
9. Michael Klentschy, Leslie Garrison, and Olga Ameral’s four-year review of student achievement data is summarized in Olaf Jorgenson and Rick Vanosdall, “The Death of Science?” *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2002, p. 604.[\[back\]](#)
10. Also see the comparison of rates of cheating at progressive and traditional schools, mentioned on page 73 of this volume.[\[back\]](#)
11. Educational historian Larry Cuban’s review of “almost 7,000 different classroom accounts and results from studies in numerous settings revealed the persistent occurrence of teacher-centered practices since the turn of the century” (*How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890–1980* [New York: Longman, 1984]). John Goodlad, author of the classic study *A Place Called School*, revisited the subject in 1999 and concluded that “although progressive views have enjoyed sufficient visibility to bring down on them and their adherents barrages of negative rhetoric, they have managed to create only isolated islands of practice. . . . Most teachers adhere closely to a view of school as they experienced it as students and so perpetuate the traditional” (“Flow, Eros, and Ethos in Educational Renewal,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 1999, p. 573). His assessment was corroborated in 2007 by a national study of first, third, and fifth grade classrooms in more than a thousand schools: “Children spent most of their time (91.2%) working in whole-group or individual-seatwork settings” and “the average fifth grader received five times as much instruction in basic skills as instruction focused on problem solving or reasoning; this ratio was 10:1 in first and third grades” (Robert C. Pianta et al., “Opportunities to Learn in America’s Elementary Classrooms,” *Science* 315 [2007]: 1795). A study of 669 classrooms in Washington State, meanwhile, found that “strong constructivist teaching was observable in about 17 percent of the classroom lessons” (Martin L. Abbott and Jeffrey T. Fouts, “Constructivist Teaching and Student Achievement,” Washington School Research Center, Technical Report #5, February 2003, p. 1). For still more evidence, see Kohn, *Schools*, pp. 5–9.[\[back\]](#)
12. David K. Cohen and Carol A. Barnes, “Conclusion: A New Pedagogy for Policy?” in *Teaching for Understanding*, eds. David K. Cohen et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), p. 245. The relevance of this point for the largely unsuccessful efforts of progressive education to establish itself over time has been noted by many thinkers, including John Dewey, Lawrence Cremin, and Linda Darling-Hammond.[\[back\]](#)



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