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## **PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION**

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### **School Reforms Hinder Learning, Crusader Argues**

Richard Lee Colvin

This selection first appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on 22 February 2000. Richard Lee Colvin is an education writer for the *Los Angeles Times*.

Conventional wisdom says schools will improve by imposing tough new standards on students.

Nonsense, says author Alfie Kohn, a popular speaker among parent and teacher groups.

How about testing children and holding them back if they don't measure up?

Child abuse, Kohn retorts.

A high school exit exam? Ranking schools by performance? Rewarding schools, teachers, and students who succeed?

Hogwash, hogwash, hogwash, says Kohn.

So, to sum up, Kohn, a former teacher and prolific author, thinks that every major effort to improve California's public schools is, to put it mildly, misguided and will make things worse instead of better.

Kohn's decidedly contrarian views might be dismissed as the ravings of an education radical. But as parents start to see how the education reforms of the last few years change what their children learn and how they are taught, as it becomes apparent that many students may be held back a grade or denied a diploma, objections are surfacing nationwide.

"I'm not alone," Kohn said. "A lot of parents get it. It's the people who have the power who don't."

Indeed, with governors and legislatures turning up the heat on schools to get better with a steady press of tougher standards, tests, and school rankings, Kohn's rants are resonating with mainstream audiences at schools, PTA meetings, and education conferences that are troubled by the reforms.

To be sure, polls show strong support for standards among parents. They also detect misgivings.

The American Association of School Administrators polled 750 parents across the country last fall and found that 42% believed that children were spending too much time taking tests and 78% thought that standardized testing was making teachers teach to the test.

Kohn is not the only one to give voice to the growing uneasiness with what reform has wrought. Jerome T. Murphy, dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, said states need to slow their march to standards to deal with such issues.

"We're getting closer to the point where there are going to be very, very serious consequences in terms of kids not getting high school diplomas and kids being left back," he said.

But Kohn, with a flair for the provocative, is a highly visible exponent. On his Web site ([www.alfiekohn.org](http://www.alfiekohn.org)), hundreds of parents share their misgivings about reforms that have taken hold across the country. The parent of a fifth-grader from Virginia complains about standards that are "unfair, unreasonable and . . . promote memorization as the only means to survive."

A parent and school board member in Wisconsin bemoans that preparing for and taking tests means that children lose time for "discussing, cooperating, playing, experimenting, creating and enjoying themselves." A school administrator from Irvine writes that, like Kohn, she thinks that standards "demean students and teachers alike."

Recognizing the potential for grass-roots resistance to derail the decade-old standards movement, U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley on Tuesday will devote his annual "State of American Education" speech to ways to head off a backlash.

### **Energetic Speeches**

Kohn nurtures this nascent backlash by traveling the country to give high-energy—his critics say shrill—speeches and peddle his books. In March, he has nine engagements, including several near his home out-

side Boston and others in Chicago, Atlanta, San Francisco and, on March 2, Cal State Northridge.

Other authors plow the same ground. But Kohn is taking it a step further, trying to organize a resistance movement. Via the Internet, he's working with allies in thirty-seven states to organize boycotts of standardized tests, which have occurred in Ohio, Michigan, and Colorado, and protest the publishing of scores in newspapers.

"The pressure to raise scores and everything to do with accountability is squeezing the intellectual life out of classrooms," Kohn said during a recent two-day swing through California. "What's being proposed to fix the problems of schools, at best, doesn't address the underlying causes and, at worst, makes them worse."

Such comments infuriate officeholders working to translate Americans' strong dissatisfaction with public schools into policy.

After Kohn spoke to the state school board association of Wisconsin in January, Gov. Tommy G. Thompson, one of the most visible governors in the standards movement, castigated him.

"It's unconscionable to stand before the students of this state and tell them they don't need to be tested, don't need to meet standards of excellence," Thompson said. "We owe them that, because life will not be getting any easier for them once they leave our schools."

Thompson's reforms have met resistance from Kohn and like-minded constituents. In a battle that Kohn touts on his Web site as a triumph for democracy, parents from Whitefish Bay led a successful campaign to persuade the legislature to back down from requiring students beginning in 2003 to pass a rigorous high school exit exam.

At the heart of the reform movement that Kohn and his allies oppose are standards for what students need to know in a given subject. Forty-nine states have adopted standards for at least one subject, most within the last three years. Forty-one test their students' knowledge of those standards, according to a survey by *Education Week*.

In 1997, California adopted standards in math, language arts, science, and social studies that are among the most detailed—and rigorous—in the nation. Starting the next year, all public school students were required to take the SAT 9 standardized test. Those scores will be factored into a number of high-stakes decisions, from promoting a student to the next grade to ranking schools by performance.

One state where politicians are hearing complaints is Virginia. The state's standards call on fifth-graders to know about such early American

cultures as the Anasazi and to be able to explain the “motivations, obstacles and accomplishments” of major expeditions from Spain, France, Portugal, and England.

How students perform on tests in the third, fifth, and eighth grades affects whether they are promoted and eventually will determine whether they graduate.

Paul Montgomery, a training executive with an apple processing company in Stephens City, Va., said his daughter got an A in social studies last year. But she failed the state’s exam, which he said showed that the test was arbitrary and unconnected to what is being taught.

“You don’t know what you missed, all you get is this score and there’s no opportunity for follow-up,” said Montgomery, who shared his frustration on Kohn’s Web site. “It just looks to me like the government had a good idea and then has created a monster, a very ugly monster.”

### **Changes in the Classroom**

Marty Guthrie, mother of a kindergartner, a fourth-grader, and a seventh-grader in Arlington, Va., a suburb of Washington, D.C., said she has seen changes in their classrooms since the state’s Standards of Learning were introduced.

She bemoans the disappearance of the “writer’s workshop,” during which her fourth-grade daughter and her peers used to share their poems and essays. Most lessons have become more structured.

“During conferences with the kids’ teachers what comes up time and again is that, ‘We’re doing this because of the standards’ or that ‘We can’t do that because it’s not in the standards test,’” she said.

As parents start to fret over the reforms and their consequences, along comes Kohn with his criticisms “and they really resonate,” Murphy said.

Philosophically, Kohn, 42, is allied with the “progressive” wing of education.

Intellectual offspring of the philosopher John Dewey, progressives believe that schools should be democratic and shaped primarily by the curiosity of students rather than a static curriculum. In addition, like the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, they think of learning as a two-way process in which children “construct” knowledge from their experiences rather than simply absorb what they are told.

“This does not mean we don’t teach fractions, but we don’t teach fractions or history or grammar except in the context of real questions

that kids want to ask,” he told parents in San Francisco. “If they’re not nested in questions that they ask, and want to answer, they won’t remember them.”

After teaching briefly in private schools, Kohn began working as a freelance journalist. His books decry competition, grades, praise or incentives of any type to motivate working or learning. His most recent book is *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and “Tougher Standards”* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1999).

In that book he complains that standards and tests require schools to adopt what he calls the “bunch ’o facts” philosophy of teaching, to the detriment of thinking and understanding.

### **Fact-Based Teaching**

The main target of Kohn’s ire is E.D. Hirsch, Jr., a University of Virginia English professor who in 1996 published a book with a similar title—*The Schools Our Children Need*—that argues the opposite point of view. In a series of books that began with *Cultural Literacy* in 1987, Hirsch asserts that, indeed, there is a body of knowledge that children need to learn to succeed in the world.

“Facts are pretty important, that’s what I’m for, definitely,” Hirsch said in response to Kohn’s “bunch ’o facts” description. The reason, he said, is that there is a high correlation between students’ “breadth of knowledge” and achievement. The relationship between knowledge and performance in school as well as after leaving school is twice as strong, according to research quoted by Hirsch, as the relationship between family income and performance.

More affluent students, he argues, pick that knowledge up informally at home. Less affluent students, having fewer opportunities, do not. So, the more information schools can share with students—about the ancient pharaohs, the works of Shakespeare, or the multiplication tables—the better.

“What really bugs me about the progressive tradition is that it has an unequal effect on educational opportunity,” Hirsch said. In contrast, he said, academic standards “have a social justice effect and the more established they become the better the rural and inner city disadvantaged students will be served.”

In November, Kohn spoke in Monterey to a conference of the California League of High Schools and urged teachers and administrators

to “roll back this awful juggernaut before it’s too late” by boycotting the state tests.

Kohn’s speech was warmly greeted, but the organization’s executive director, Peter Murphy, said it wasn’t likely that his members would heed the call to fight back.

“The law is the law and they’re going to have to deal with standards,” he said. “They want to have high standards and help their students meet them.”

But some of those who heard the message were inspired.

Pamela Curtiss-Horton, an Oakland first-grade teacher, has distributed Kohn’s articles to her fellow teachers. She tells parents they can decide not to have their children tested, and she refuses to use district-mandated test study sheets.

“I take the stand that they can do whatever they want to me, but I’m not going to do something that’s harmful to my students,” she said. “I teach them what they need to learn.”

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## A Unique School or Out of Step?

*Berkeley Campus has everything going for it except rising test scores. Students are taught to learn through “discovery.” Some wonder whether that is the culprit.*

Richard Lee Colvin

This selection first appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on 2 September 1999. Richard Lee Colvin is an education writer for the *Los Angeles Times*.

BERKELEY—Columbus Elementary School seems to have everything going for it. Everything, that is, except good test scores.

The school spends almost \$8,000 per pupil, far more than the national average of \$6,300, to pay for extra training for teachers, equipment and books galore. Its campus is new, designed as a cozy village of airy, ochre-colored cottages.