

**The Schools Our Children Deserve:  
Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and “Tougher  
Standards”**

by Alfie Kohn , *Houghton Mifflin*. 344 pp. \$24.00

Reviewed by  
Mark Goldblatt

That American schools are currently being swept by a “back-to-basics” movement is hardly news. Every day brings fresh word of our students’ poor performance in some core subject—embarrassingly low math and science scores as compared with other Western nations, runaway failure rates in reading among inner-city grade-schoolers. Many parents, educators, and public officials have sensibly concluded that the remedy for this deficit is a return to fundamentals, backed up by rigorous testing.

Just how American schools managed to stray so far from the basics is likewise no mystery. Much of the immediate blame lies with the trendy pedagogy introduced in the late 1960’s under the banner of “progressive” education. Across the country, teachers imbued with this creed began to emphasize creativity over right answers, self-esteem over measurable achievement, and community spirit over individual effort. Predictably enough, test scores began to drop.

Alfie Kohn, the author of several previous books on American education, knows all this history, but he has an unusual take on it. He believes that the problem with today’s schools is not a lack of traditional instruction but a surfeit of it. Despite the transformations of the last 30 years, he passionately argues, our classrooms are not nearly “progressive” enough. Indeed, as Kohn sees it, the push for higher standards in American education can only serve to place our children at a still greater distance from “true learning.”

According to Kohn, traditionalists approach education as if it were a manufacturing process. Students are the raw material, and schools—through the use of tools like lectures, textbooks, worksheets, and grades—are expected to shape them into a particular kind of product, possessing “very specific skills and bits of knowledge.” Kohn finds the roots of this view in the work of the behaviorist psychologist B.F. Skinner and the testing pioneer Edward Thorndike, and he points to the education writer E.D. Hirsch as its leading present-day exponent, deriding Hirsch’s widely publicized program of “cultural literacy” as “bunch o’ facts” pedagogy.

Rather than teaching children how to think, Kohn contends, traditionalists focus on the mere transmission of information, embodied in standardized curricula. The tell-tale sign of this benighted approach is drilling—memory exercises on everything from state capitals and the multiplication tables to vocabulary and the parts of speech. A teacher of traditionalist bent will thus spend a great deal of time defining a word like “nationalism,” Kohn laments, while ignoring the opportunity to discuss with students “what the world would be like if there were no countries.”

By contrast, the “progressive” model of education championed by Kohn has very different origins and aims. It flows, he informs us, from the work of the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey and the psychologist Jean Piaget. In their view, education should aspire to be responsive to the needs and interests of students, allowing them

to instruct themselves insofar as possible and to judge things on their own. The byword—and highest goal—of such instruction is “critical thinking.”

That pedagogy of this sort often leaves students with a poor command of standard usage does not trouble Kohn. To appreciate the advantages of progressive education, he argues, we must discard such outmoded benchmarks, and he regales us with wonderful anecdotes of classroom breakthroughs to illustrate the resultant benefits. In his book, teachers at their most inspiring are seen operating without aid of script or text-book while helping students to solve truly challenging problems. Such are the rewards, he proclaims, that await us once we shed our preoccupation with “performance! results! achievement! success!” and devote ourselves instead to the wondrous and ongoing process of learning.

In short, by the time he is through, Alfie Kohn has managed to re-create every pie-in-the-sky argument for “progressive” education that has bedeviled the theory and practice of American schooling from Dewey to the present day. And he has also managed to heap contumely on the vast majority of Americans who persist in believing that, upon receiving a high-school diploma, a student should be able to read well, write competently, calculate quickly and correctly, and actually know a range of historical, cultural, and scientific facts about the world in which he lives. To Kohn, this makes his fellow Americans enemies of “critical thinking.”

But this is nonsense. The truth, as E.D. Hirsch and others have long argued, is that possessing a certain amount of basic knowledge is the prerequisite for any kind of genuine intellectual engagement. In Kohn’s dark musings, this renewed commitment to the basics—a project whose prime movers he identifies as Christian extremists, conservative ideologues, and the greedy forces of corporate America—is not simply wrong, it is cruel. But the truth is again the opposite: the ideas Kohn promotes have themselves been responsible for decades of educational cruelty.

Among the children of the better-off, the effects of “progressive” pedagogy have perhaps been mitigated by the advantages with which they begin life. But for students from more deprived circumstances, especially in our inner cities, “progressive” education has been a disaster, denying them the basic skills that are their ticket to better lives. Is it foolhardy to expect such grim considerations to trouble the dreams of a self-described “progressive”? Evidently so.