

**The Schools Our Children Deserve; Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and “Tougher Standards”
by Alfie Kohn, 1999**

SESSION TWO Discussion Guide for Table Facilitators (Participants can reference book outline packet for specific chapters and subheadings as a refresher.)

Chapter 7: For The Love of Learning

Before a real discussion can occur about school reform, it is important that we define our purpose for education and schooling. In this chapter, Kohn *“raises the question of whether we see schools as places where cultural knowledge is transmitted to a new generation in order to preserve important institutions, or as places where a new generation learns the skills and dispositions necessary to evaluate those institutions. Again, it’s more a continuum than and either or, but the point on that continuum we identify as ideal makes all the difference.”* Page 116. **What is your definition or conception of the purpose of schooling?**

In the subsection entitled “The Secret of Success” he emphasizes the importance of *interest* in student learning. He wrote: *“If we want kids to learn for the right reasons, then the content and method of the instruction becomes directly relevant.”* Page 127. He states simply: *“Here’s another way of putting it: where interest appears, achievement usually follows.”* Page 128. **What are your thoughts about his assertion that curriculum has to be of interest to students in order for real learning to take place? What implications would this have on our schools?**

Chapter 8: Education at Its Best

Kohn speaks at length about successful learning being based on student interest and the work of John Dewey, Progressive Education, and Constructivism. He writes: *“Constructivism is derived from the recognition that knowledge is constructed rather than absorbed: we form beliefs, build theories, make order. We act on the environment rather than just responding to it—and we do it naturally and continually. It’s part of who we are.”*⁶ Page 132. **What are your thoughts about Progressive Education and Constructivism? What would you envision a classroom or school that adopted such a philosophy to look like in practice? What would you see going on?**

Obviously, there would be detractors who would not want to implement progressive ideas. Change is hard and scary. Kohn writes: *“Bringing kids in on the process of designing their own education is particularly terrifying to the staunch defenders of traditional education, who’s tightly regulated classroom procedures represent the polar opposite of something messy, something unpredictable—something, well, democratic.”* Page 151. **How might you go about making a case for progressive reforms to someone who is reticent about embracing such change?**

Chapter 9: Getting the 3 R’s Right (*This chapter is heavy with classroom pedagogy and can be skipped for matters of time.)

Kohn spends time in this chapter discussing reading and writing instruction in the classroom. There is great debate between models using phonics and basal readers vs. the Whole Language model. This debate also includes discussion about Weekly Spelling and Vocabulary Lists. He writes: *“As parents, we often think about that fundamental difference and then ask which model seems to describe more accurately what reading is all about. Which model seems more respectful of children? Which is more likely to help them become enthusiastic*

readers— or even skillful decoders?” Page 163. **Without trashing either model, comment on any positive aspects of either model you see as beneficial to young learners – even if it pushes you out of your comfort zone a bit.**

Chapter 10: The Way Out

In paragraph two on page 183, Kohn suggests four reasons for the poor implementation of progressive reforms in education: too much too fast, absence of structural supports for teachers, imposing change on teachers, and failure to provide proper training. ***If you were to propose some aspect of progressive reform in your district, what would it be and how would you structure its implementation so as not to fall into the failure trappings describe above?***

As if our comfort zones about educational reform were not pushed to their limits, Kohn suggests getting rid of grades altogether. He even provides a sample letter on page 190 that high schools could include with college applications explaining why a district had decided to abolish the traditional grading system. ***What are your thoughts about doing away with grades and replacing them with performance assessments, portfolios, and parent/student/teacher conferences?***

Kohn ends the book by writing: *“Our challenge over the long haul is not to accommodate ourselves to what doesn’t make sense but to work together to replace it with something more productive. For every workshop on how to help kids do well on standardized tests, there should be three on how to fight for the abolition of these tests. If many people in our communities are surprised to hear about alternatives, this suggests that the apparently high level of support for, and interest in, such tests may reflect simple ignorance about better ways of evaluating students and schools...This is why it’s so important for us to educate ourselves about the effects of standardized tests and the existence of alternatives –and then to educate our friends and acquaintances, raising questions in the supermarket and the hairdresser’s, at dinner parties and playgrounds.”* Page 205

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***Alphonse Kohn has given many speeches based on this book that can be viewed on YouTube. Type in his name and watch him in person!**

Broad questions to open wide, and we hope, very safe and non-threatening conversation:

What surprised you or made a really strong impression in what you read and what we have discussed tonight? (Need to make time for a very safe conversation here, not letting anyone correct or reject what surprised each person and ensuring that all participants at the table have plenty of time to speak and reflect.) After each person who wishes to speak has described the surprises or takeaways, ***ask whether there are one or two other surprises we haven’t covered.***

What has struck you in our reading or in our conversation tonight that seems relevant to what you may have noticed happening in Ohio or in our CH-UH School district?

After reading this book, do you feel there is a need for future action? If so, what?