

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

**SESSION ONE** (April 7, 2016) Discussion Guide for Table Facilitators (Participants can reference book outline packet for specific chapters and subheadings as a refresher.)

**Chapter 1: Forward into the Past**

This chapter talks about the need of many to get “back to the basics”. ***What are “The basics”, and did we really leave them behind? Do we need them?***

This chapter describes several problems with current educational practices. Specifically, Kohn outlines 5 fatal flaws in schools: *A preoccupation with achievement, Old school methods of teaching, reliance on standardized testing, imposing specific requirements and trying to coerce improvement, and requiring that instruction become harder in order to become better.* ***Comment on these “fatal flaws” that have been mentioned.***

**Chapter 2: Getting Motivation Wrong: The Cost of Overemphasizing Achievement**

This chapter discusses the cost of overemphasizing achievement, specifically: *student interest, student reaction to failure, student avoidance of challenge, and the quality of learning.* Kohn also discusses *effort, ability, luck, and difficulty.* ***What are your thoughts about student achievement?***

Time is also spent discussing grades. ***Your (brief) thoughts on the role of grades in school?***

**Chapter 3: Getting Teaching and Learning Wrong: Traditional Education and Its Victims**

“The current reform movement is also vulnerable because of how it defines achievement. The vast majority of policymakers have accepted a dubious set of assumptions about what good teaching and learning are all about... in most states, to stand for educational excellence is to issue a list that begins: “All students will be able to...”– the implicit assumption that all students need the same amount of time to reach a certain goal... every student must be able to do such and such by the end of second grade... the result of grade by grade standards, with their willful disregard of individual differences, is that some children will be branded as failures because they don’t learn as quickly as their peers.” Page 47. ***How do you feel about grade level standards?***

Subsections of this chapter emphasized “thinking comes later”, “facts must be memorized”, “skills require drills”, “the point is to get the right answer”, “get to the Civil War by Thanksgiving”, “bring your own containers”, “don’t do something– sit there”, and “give it to them in bits and pieces”. ***What are your thoughts about this type of passive and quick-paced learning?***

**Chapter 4: Getting Evaluation Wrong: The Case Against Standardized Testing**

The position statement of this organization, last year’s book study, and the three public forums hosted last year clearly state the massive problems with standardized testing and reasons to be against such assessments. The author further supports many of the arguments we already understand. ***Do you have any brief comments about Alfie Kohn’s discussion of standardized testing?***

## Chapter 5: Getting School Reform Wrong: The Arrogance of Top-Down Coercion

In the sub section entitled “Do It My Way...or Else”, Alfie Kohn discusses the “Support Model” and the “Demand Model” on page 93. Take some time to quickly re-read that page. ***Which model do you think our schools currently operate under? Do you think our schools could transition to the other model? How might that happen?***

## Chapter 6: Getting Improvement Wrong: Confusing Harder with Better

Many reformers feel that if we make school harder we will achieve better results. Current thinking suggests that we need to increase the time students are in school, increase the amount of homework, and increase the number of student retentions. ***How do you feel about such increases?***

International and comparative research indicate that the United States clings tightly to *tracking students, retention of students, yearly testing of elementary students in reading and writing, teacher centered approaches to instruction, and the return to the teaching of “basics”*– the complete opposite of educational reforms in Japan and other high ranking countries around the world. ***Comment on the reticence of the United States to adopt more progressive modes of educational reform. In other words, why are we still stuck in our ways?***

***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.*** Cut it off after two.

***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?*** (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.*** Cut it off after two.

**As we come back together, the overall moderator might want to surface two or three surprises/strong takeaways and two or three of the most relevant issues to Ohio and CH-UH from among the small groups.**

**Encourage participants to read the remaining chapters and appendices in the book and to return on April 13 with comments, questions, suggestions, and solutions to the many issues discussed here tonight.**