What You Can Do to Fight Standardized Tests is excerpted from *The Case Against Standardized Testing: Raising the Scores, Ruining the Schools* by Alfie Kohn. © 2000 by Alfie Kohn

All rights reserved. No part of this material from *The Case Against Standardized Testing* may be reproduced in any form or by electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.
WHAT YOU CAN DO TO FIGHT STANDARDIZED TESTS

Whether you work alone, with an existing organization, or in a new network that you help to form, begin by learning all you can about the tests used in your state as well as more generic testing issues. Then:

1. Talk to friends and neighbors at every opportunity: in line at the supermarket; in the dentist’s waiting room; on airplanes; at the hairdresser’s and the playground; at dinner parties and children’s birthday parties. Help people in your community understand that if a local official boasts about rising test scores, they should consider responding, “You know, if that’s what you’re mostly concerned about, then I’m worried about the quality of my child’s schooling.”

2. Get in the habit of attending—and speaking out at—school board meetings and other events dealing with educational policy.

3. Let parents know they can write a letter to school administrators or board members expressing concern that test preparation is eclipsing more important learning activities.

4. Write to—or, better yet, get together a delegation of concerned citizens and then visit—your state legislators and other public officials. (This is the sort of familiar and predictable recommendation that you may be tempted to skip over, but it really ought to be taken seriously. Politicians respond to pointed and persistent lobbying, and, as a rule, they haven’t heard nearly enough from those of us who feel strongly about this issue.) Your goal may be simply to educate policy makers about the effects of testing, or it may be to encourage them to oppose (or support) specific policies and legislation.

5. Write letters to the editor—or, better yet, op-eds—for your local newspaper (some samples are available at www.alfiekohn.org and www.fairtest.org).

6. Organize a delegation of educators and/or parents and request a meeting with the education reporter and top editors of your paper. Help them to see how problematic it is to cite...
rising or falling test scores as an indication of educational quality. Explain to them that most experts in the field oppose high-stakes testing in particular. And tell them: “Every time you publish a chart that ranks schools on the basis of test scores, our kids’ learning suffers. Here’s why . . .”

7. Sponsor a forum or teach-in on testing. Invite the media. Sign up new volunteers. Such a meeting might carry a provocative tide to attract those already on your side (e.g., “Standardized Testing: Waste of Time or Menace to Children?”), but then again it might be promoted in more neutral terms (“Rethinking Standardized Testing”) to attract more people. Those responsible for the tests can be invited to appear and respond to questions.

8. Print up bumper stickers with slogans such as STANDARDIZED TESTING IS DUMBING DOWN OUR SCHOOLS. (Here, it is definitely appropriate to be provocative.)

9. Participate in— and ensure press coverage of— some form of protest. This can include marches and demonstrations, as well as other, more targeted activities, such as those already taking place in some areas, described below.

10. Remind sympathetic school officials that under no circumstances should they brag about high (or rising) scores. To do so is not only misleading; it serves to legitimate the tests. In fact, people associated with high-scoring schools or districts have a unique opportunity to make an impact. It’s easy for critics to be dismissed with a “sour grapes” argument: You’re just opposed to standardized testing because it makes you look bad. But administrators and school board members in high-scoring areas can say, “Actually our students happen to do well on these stupid tests, but that’s nothing to be proud of. We value great teaching and learning, which is what suffers when people become preoccupied with scores. Please join us in phasing them out.”

11. Speak to educational service agencies, universities, and administrators who offer events for teachers that provide advice on raising test scores and teaching to the standards.
THE CASE AGAINST STANDARDIZED TESTING

Remind them that for every workshop or in-service event with this goal, three should be offered that encourage teachers to challenge the standards and tests—or at least help them think about how to protect their students from the damaging effects.

12. Invite researchers in the area to commission a survey. When it’s completed, release the results at a press conference. One group of investigators suggested including these questions:

Do the tests improve students’ motivation? Do parents understand the results? Do teachers think that the tests measure the curriculum fairly? Do administrators use the results wisely? How much money is spent on assessment and related services? How much time do teachers spend preparing students for various tests? Do the media report the data accurately and thoroughly? Our surveys suggest that many districts will be shocked to discover the degree of dissatisfaction among stakeholders.118

13. Challenge politicians, corporate executives, and others who talk piously about the need to “raise the bar,” impose “tougher standards,” and ensure “accountability,” to take the tests themselves. This is especially important in the case of high-stakes exit exams, which are increasingly being used to deny diplomas to students who don’t pass them.

There are two ways to issue such an invitation to decision makers: first, as a private opportunity for them to learn more about (and, perhaps, understand the absurdity of) the exam; second, as a public challenge for them to take the test and agree to have their scores published in the newspaper. The first approach was used in West Bend, Wisconsin, where about thirty business leaders took a short version of the state’s proposed graduation exam. They “had so much trouble with it that some wonder[ed] whether it truly will measure the quality of future employees.” One bank executive—presumably a supporter of testing in the abstract until he encountered the actual test—remarked, “I think it’s good to challenge students, but not like this.”119

The second approach was taken by the St. Petersburg Times when it “challenged several top elected officials to join 735,000 Florida schoolchildren . . . by taking the rigorous Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. They declined. Some did so with
a sense of humor. Some admitted the math might give them fits. Others were unamused by the entire exercise. All said no.” Educators and parents might consider holding a press conference to issue such a public challenge, arguing that if officials fear they won’t be able to pass the test, they should be prepared to justify requiring teenagers to do something that they, themselves, cannot. And if they refuse the challenge, they should be called on to defend their refusal.

14. Consider filing a lawsuit against the tests, which are potentially vulnerable in many ways. They may be inherently discriminatory. They may be used despite the absence of evidence that they are statistically valid measurement instruments. They may be inconsistent with the state’s own standards—or require students to know that which hasn’t yet been taught.

15. Investigate whether your state has an “opt-out” clause that allows parents to exempt their children from testing just by notifying the authorities. These are not widely known—indeed, even some activists are not always aware of their existence in their own states—but they ought to be publicized if they are on the books where you live.

16. Perhaps the most extreme—but, in the opinion of a growing number of people, well justified—strategy is to boycott the tests even where there is no opt-out provision.

That seems kind of drastic

Desperate circumstances call for drastic action. The evidence offered in this book, which corroborates what many teachers already know, supports the conclusion that we are facing an educational emergency in this country. The intellectual life is being squeezed out of schools—or at least prevented from developing in schools—as tests take over the curriculum. Punitive consequences are being meted out on the basis of manifestly inadequate and inappropriate exams. Children are literally becoming sick with fear over their scores. Massive numbers of students—particularly low-income and minority students—may be pushed out of school altogether.
In short, more and more people believe that writing letters to the editor isn’t enough, that a line has been crossed such that we can no longer justify our participation in—and tacit support of—these testing programs. One kind of boycott involves students who, on their own or at their parents’ behest, refuse to show up for tests and make it clear why they are doing so. There are various ways in which educators can support such an action: by making sure that students and parents know that boycotts already are taking place elsewhere; by speaking out in support of those who decide to do this; by teaching students about the theory and practice of civil disobedience; by suggesting alternative educational activities in which prospective boycotters can participate on test day; and by lobbying local officials to make sure that these students are not punished. (Of course, teachers who are also parents can invite their own children to consider being part of such a protest.)

In another kind of boycott, educators themselves refuse to be part of the testing program. Like Bartleby in Melville’s short story, who created an uproar when, “in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, ‘I would prefer not to,’ ” they declare that they simply cannot in good conscience break the shrink-wrap on those exams and thereby become part of something they believe is bad for children.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

For more information or to purchase, please visit Heinemann by clicking the link below:


Use of this material is solely for individual, noncommercial use and is for informational purposes only.