

Policy Forum: National Standards & Testing (4/26/01)

Darcy Olsen: Introduction

I see a lot of familiar faces and I thank you for coming. I hope you'll take a look at the roster and see who your colleagues are because I think, for many of you, there are people here who you'll want to meet today, so I hope you'll take advantage of that opportunity.

As you know this is a very timely event. Many of you come from the Hill and this is being debated even as we speak. *Christian Science Monitor* has a front-page story. *USA Today* was talking about standards today. And, of course, the risk of having such a timely event is that sometimes we get folks who are called into action and this is what happened today to Kent Talbert, so unfortunately he's in negotiations and he won't be able to make it and sends his regrets. Fortunately for us we have an outstanding panel and I hope that if you do have political questions that you wanted to direct at Kent that you'll feel free to ask some of us instead.

The Bush Administration's idea for testing is very simple and he simply says, "How can we know what children are learning if they're not being tested?" And, of course, the idea is that if we have a test we can hold schools more accountable for teaching students. I think that everyone on this panel, generally—probably most of you in the audience—favor the idea of having schools that are accountable to students. But where we differ often is on what does it mean to be accountable and what is the best way to go about having accountability. Up here today we have three very distinct viewpoints on what it takes to have an education system that is accountable for teaching students what their parents and for some people what the government thinks these children should know.

Our first speaker today will be Alfie Kohn. Alfie is the author of eight books on education and human behavior. The most recent is "The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms" and "Tougher Standards," and the "Case Against Standardized Testing." So it may be from the titles of these books to get an idea of where he might be coming from today. *Time* magazine recently described him as "perhaps the country's most outspoken critic of education's fixation on grades and test scores." And he truly is outspoken and we're pleased to have him here. He's written widely: *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *LA Times* and he's been on NPR, the Oprah Winfrey Show and if you ever want any of his material he has a site alfiekohn.org that you are invited to visit.

Our second speaker today will be Sheldon Richman. Sheldon is an editor of *Liberty*, which is a monthly magazine about individual freedom and

free markets. He is also the author of “Separating School and State: How to Liberate America’s Families,” and he’s the author of two other books, as well. He has been widely published as all of our panelists have: *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Washington Times*, *American Scholar* and he recently contributed a chapter called “Individuality, Education and Entrepreneurship” to the volume “Education and A Free Society,” which is published by the Hoover Institution. And, of course, his very most recent publication is the one he did today for the Cato Institute called “Parent Power.”

Finally, last, but not least, we have Dr. Eugene W. Hickok. Many of you know that Dr. Hickok was secretary of education under the Ridge administration starting in 1995. He enacted legislation that allowed for the creation of charter public schools. He worked hard to establish academic standards and he also created “Read to Succeed,” which is a program that is supposed to ensure that Pennsylvania students are able to read when they finish the third grade. From 1980 until his appointment in 1995 with the Ridge administration he taught political science at Dickenson College in Carlisle. Now he’s working as senior advisor to Secretary Paige.

Each of our panelists will speak about 10 -12 minutes and afterwards we’ll give them a 2-3 minute rebuttal and then we’ll open it up to questions, so please hold your questions, comments and criticisms for the end and please give a warm round of applause to Alfie Kohn.

Alfie Kohn:

Thank you and thanks for the opportunity to come and address what I believe could accurately be called an educational emergency that we are facing in this country now, but ironically the emergency has been in large part created in the name of raising standards—not as a result of the kinds of conditions that are used to justify those standards. Let me offer some facts, which I believe are indisputable and I will offer some opinions that are disputable.

Fact number one is that at this point in time United States students are tested to an extent that is unprecedented in our history and unparalleled anywhere else in the world. It is perhaps because of that fact that Ken Talbert’s former boss, the Republican former head of the House Education Committee, commented not long ago that if more testing were the answer to the problems in our schools, testing would have solved them a long time ago.

Fact two, standardized tests are primarily measures of the size of the houses near a school or to put it in a more technical language—up to 90 percent of the variants in test scores between schools, towns or states can be explained solely on the basis of socio-economic status without even knowing

what's going on in the classrooms. To the extent that's true one might respond by saying it is illegitimate and even unethical to publish or take seriously rankings of schools, towns or states on the basis of test scores.

Third fact, research has demonstrated repeatedly that there is a positive correlation between how well a kid scores on standardized tests and how shallow his or her thinking tends to be. Research has repeatedly classified kids on the basis of whether they tend to be deep or shallow thinkers (I can talk to you about the criteria if you want) and there has been found to be in elementary, middle and high school a positive correlation between the shallow approach and how well kids do on standardized tests. It's not a one-to-one correspondence, there are some kids who are deep thinkers who do well on tests, some kids who are neither, but in general that's the way it works. So higher test scores for an individual student is not usually a good sign.

Fact four, every major organization in the field of educational measurement has concluded that it is unethical to make high-stakes decisions, such as whether a kid should be flunked and forced to repeat a grade or denied a diploma at the end of high school on the basis of a single test or set of tests. The Procedures National Research Council says this, the American Educational Research Association—it is the accepted standard in this field and yet half the states violating that standard and violating common sense say 12 years of academic accomplishment can be irrelevant—you don't pass this test, you don't get a diploma.

Fact five, there is no good evidence that a test-based approach to school reform, let alone high-stakes testing, is effective. The only exception to this is that you can prove that when you drill kids relentlessly on tests (often to the exclusion of anything else going on in the school) you can raise scores on that test, but it violates basic precepts of educational measurement to use the same test as a lever for accountability and then also as the metric by which to judge whether that approach has been successful. But we do know that states that use high-stakes testing tend to do less well on the National Assessment of Educational Progress than states that do not use high-stakes tests. We have research with individual classrooms that find that when teachers are told you are going to be held accountable for your performance in here and for raising tests that those teacher's students tend not to do as well even on the same tests compared to students taught by teachers given the same curriculum to teach, but given the instruction instead of see if you can facilitate your students understanding of this material.

We know for example that dropouts tend to increase in number when you say to people you pass this test or else. So in effect, there is no evidence suggesting that any kind of testing or accountability based approach to education has a positive effect after high school. So in effect, kids are being used in a kind of giant high-stakes experiment here.

Last fact, which I think is very hard to dispute, is that the time to raise test scores in schools has to come from somewhere. Where it's coming from now, all over the country, is denying recess to little kids; cutting back on music and the arts; and less time for building social and moral skills by having kids participate in class meetings. Looking at current events [regardless of whatever you thought of the last presidential election) followed by a presidential election—it was a wonderful opportunity for the kids to learn about politics, history, math and psychology, and yet I've heard from teachers from all over the place saying I would have loved to use this natural occurring learning opportunity, but there's not going to be any question about today's headlines on the standardized tests, so I couldn't.

Good electives, rich projects that are interdisciplinary—all of these are being scaled back across the country in the name of raising standards, so that when parents hear local officials claim our test scores went up their first response should be “Oh no, what did you have to sacrifice to make that happen?”

There are degrees of badness in standardized tests. You know a test is inadequate if it's mostly multiple-choice because that doesn't give kids a chance to generate answers or even explain them. You know a test is problematic if it's timed, as in, you have 45 minutes to complete this section because then what you are really measuring is not thoughtfulness, but speed. You know a testing system is problematic if standardized tests are given to kids before the end of third grade. I do not know a single reputable expert in the United States in early childhood education who believes that it is legitimate, ethical or even useful to use standardized tests below that age and I can explain why if you want. And you know a testing system is problematic if it includes the so-called norm reference tests (like the Ohio test, the Stanford, the Terranova, and so on) because those tests were never devised to try to tell you whether kids are learning or whether schools are doing a good job. Those tests are artificially designed to spread out the scores and all you know is who is better than whom—not whether anyone is learning. And finally, you know a testing system is problematic if the tests are given every single year because at that point the tests have cannibalized the curriculum and you have assumed that kids must march in lock step fashion where every eight year old must be here and every nine year old must be here, which flies in the face of what we know about child development and demands that failures are created. Mandatory annual testing of the kind that the Bush administration has proposed and that to their shame even the opposition has apparently assented to is an approach that will in effect say we will create failures where they don't have to exist because kids learn and grow at a different pace.

Underlying the basic assumption about test-based reform is the notion that harder is the same as better. A kind of mindless macho approach that

says we can judge tests and text and teachers and schools on the basis of whether they're rigorous, challenging, demanding, and tough enough. You hear this kind of language constantly even though a bright six year old can tell you that something can be too hard just as surely as it can be too easy. To judge schools primarily on the basis of whether they are sufficiently difficult is like judging an opera on the basis of whether it contains a lot of notes that it's really hard for the singers to hit. In other words, it misses most of what matters and that is indeed the governing mindset these days where high school tests are being offered in some states that I know I couldn't pass. At least not without a lot of pointless cramming, which raises the question of what Deborah Myer (sp?) calls Myers Mandate, namely, that no student should be required to do that which a successful cross-section of adults in the community cannot, to which I would add modestly, Kohn's corollary to Myers Mandate which is that anyone who talks sanctimoniously about accountability, raising the bar, and tougher standards should be required to take these tests themselves and have their scores published in the newspaper.

Very quickly I want to offer two myths with respect to standardized testing. Myth one, you need tests for accountability. No knowledgeable educator would ever make such a claim. Never mind the fierce, frantic demands for accountability and where they came from. Let's put that aside. Parents were not sitting around Starbucks one day saying our schools need to be held accountable, rather, it grew out of a report called "A Nation at Risk" in 1983, which we now know to have been based on misleading and exaggerated evidence, claiming for political reasons that our schools are all failures and setting the stage for the testing fad we find ourselves in now. But if the notion is we need to make sure that schools are good and they're accountable in the best sense of that term, you don't need a standardized test to do it. In fact, you may need the absence of standardized tests so you create a climate that's about learning instead of fear that allows students and teachers to demonstrate what's really going on and how much progress is being made, and if you'd want, I'd be happy to talk for hours about more authentic, reasonable, and indeed, rigorous ways to tell whether students are learning and whether schools are effective. But let us at least make sure that we distinguish sharply between a desire for accountability and the confusion that with standardized testing in particular.

The other myth is that you need standardized tests to make sure that poor kids and kids of color are not being neglected. They have been neglected. African-American and Latino kids in the inner cities have been sentenced to second-rate schools to our everlasting shame. But this cure is worse than the disease. It is, in large part, turning these schools into third-rate schools, now, into giant test-prep centers. Visit Houston if you want to see an educational nightmare. Or, for that matter, Baltimore schools, Chicago schools, where kids have been turned into, essentially, trained seals barking out phonemes on command. Where the kind of rich, meaningful understanding is still going to

go on in the rich, white suburbs despite the pressures of testing and accountability. And the gap will grow ever larger. Then when you add to this high-stakes testing and you say to kids, "It doesn't matter if you can demonstrate your confidence for years by authentic measures of what you understand: you don't pass this test, you don't get a diploma." The kids will leave. The kids are leaving. In Texas now, partly as a result of high stakes testing, more than 40 percent of black and Latino ninth graders never get a diploma. In New York City, the dropout rate went up two percentage points last year, and two percentage points the year before that, and is expected to, quote, "skyrocket" according to a report released to the chancellors office as a direct result of what is done in their name. Ladies and gentlemen, if we allow high-stakes testing to continue, we are going to face what I would describe as an "educational ethnic cleansing in America" and it will all be done in the name of accountability.

The last point I want to address in the few minutes allotted to each of here is the notion behind standardized testing which is that folks in the state capital and folks sometimes in Washington know better. Even if you disagreed with almost everything I said, and you think that standards and tests are terrific, you cannot have a successful policy by having people mandated to do what other people believe is in their best interests. There is plenty of room for disagreement for what constitutes effective educational assessment. I don't pretend to have the answer. But the accountability and standards movement is distinguished primarily by its utter intolerance for disagreement. It is profoundly one of the most democratic movements in the history of American education. It reminds me of a sign I saw once on a classroom wall that said, "The beatings will continue until morale improves."

One of the practical effects of this approach is that we are not only pushing kids out of school and not only undermining the most effective curriculum in the name of raising test scores. But we are also forcing out teachers. I travel all over this country. I've talked to and listened to educators in almost every state. I've been to 46 of the states, I think, in the last few years. And let me tell you the teachers who are bailing out are not the mediocre teachers who are afraid of being held accountable. They are some of our most talented educators who say, "I do not want to be turned into a test-prep technician and have my curriculum dictated by politicians on the local, state, or national level, or by testing manufacturers." And they're leaving. And to the extent that is true, that is one more respect in which the talk about higher standards has the effect of lowering standards. I don't necessarily agree with my hosts here that everything can be seen through the lens of government bad, private sector good. I don't believe the problem here is just government. In fact, I believe that the governmental policies that I've been describing are most pernicious because they follow a private sector model, a series of metaphors and methods that have to do with incentives and sanctions, that have to do with an approach to teaching that is ultimately not about helping

kids explore but is about preparing kids to be workers and raise the profit of corporations.

We may agree on issues having to do with what government is doing right now. Ultimately, I believe education is a public good. That we do not make things better by setting people against each other in a vicious and toxic race to defeat each other. Nor do we improve education by treating parents merely as consumers so that learning becomes something of an SUV or a snack that is for sale in the marketplace. But I do believe, and I think we can make common cause here, at least I can make common cause with some of you that what is going on now in terms of national and state top-down, heavy-handed policies is leading a growing number of folks to say this is a disaster for children. We may use half a generation to this testing fad and we can do anything, it seems these days, no matter how silly or counterproductive as long as we utter the mantras of accountability and rigor and higher standards.

Last week, more than a hundred parents of eighth graders in Scarsdale, New York said, "This is not a matter for writing letters to the editor anymore. This is a matter for civil disobedience. And they refused to have their children participate in New York's testing program. That's going on in inner cities too, though that didn't make the newspaper in Tucson and inner city **Barrio**, and inner city Boston. A week from Monday, thousands of students, teachers, and parents from all over New York State are going to march on Albany. Rich and poor, black and white, rural, urban, and suburban and say, "We want kids to become proficient and engaged learners and what is going on in the name of standardized testing and accountability not only doesn't help, but actively discourages that. We are facing an educational emergency and it is in the process of stirring up a counter-reaction in this country right now, featuring two aspects utterly absent in the accountability movement: democracy and common sense. Thank you.

Darcy Olsen:

We don't hear that everyday around here anymore, do we. Thank you so much, Alfie. Sheldon?

Sheldon Richman:

Thank you, Darcy. Hello, everyone. It's nice to be back at the Cato Institute. I read the paper this morning and realized I'd been away from Washington a little too long because everything is a moving target in Washington. I read that the Bush administration now is talking watering down the accountability provisions of his bill, so you never know what, day to day, what to attack because you may be dating yourself quickly because you haven't read the morning paper.

We've come a long way since the early eighties when the Reagan Administration would say things like, "Government is not the solution, government is the problem." When they called for the abolition of the Department of Education, not that they did anything in those directions, but at least at a rhetorical level it warmed many of our hearts. And now we've come along way from that, of course because the Bush message is that government is not the problem, government is the solution and that we need to increase the budget of the Department of Education and have new directives coming down from the Department of Education and expansion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

This has all lead, I think, quite sensibly to Barney Frank's remark when Bush unveiled his education plan. Reagan is gone; the New Deal affirmed. It's not your father's GOP. The Bush plan is really just an extension of what government, advocates of larger government, have been saying right along. For 150 years or so we've had teachers in schools accountable, to the use the Bush favorite term, to local governments and state governments. And now the Bush addition to that will be to have the lower level governments accountable to the federal government. A bigger government. This doesn't sound promising if the idea is to see education improved; however one defines that. I don't think we should regard there being a correlation between the amount of government and the quality of education; quite the opposite. I think it's time not to be looking for new government solutions to whatever we perceive as the problems in education but rather, time to rethink the entire institutional setting in which education occurs. After all, we are about in 150th year, roughly, of the grand experiment in which government, not parents, makes all the big decisions about children's education. And it's not usually thought of that way, but that's actually what goes on and what has been going on since the mid 19th-century. When you put it in those terms, it should strike every American as a little strange that it's government that makes all the big decisions. I mean, after all, where the child goes to school, largely how many hours a day, how many days a year, how many years; those decisions are made by bureaucrats, effectively, or elected officials, which is a related species.

So, I would like to not get into the debate over the pedagogy. I mean, which is the best method of educating children? That's not my area. I don't mind saying that my sympathies are with Alfie Kohn on this question, but that's not what I want to talk about. I want to talk about something slightly different, institutional setting in which education occurs. After all, during those same 150 years we have deprived, education has been deprived of something which, in effect, has worked miracles in almost every other area of our lives, namely, entrepreneurship. That's the biggest thing lacking from education. It's dominated by bureaucracy, which is the polar opposite of entrepreneurship. Now by that I don't simply mean that things would be better if businessmen made money-providing education. That's a pretty shallow way to put it, and if that's the only way you think of it, then I think you've missed

the big point. Because the competitive marketplace is not simply a place where people provide goods and services with anticipation of profit, although that certainly happens, and that's an important part of it. But that kind of misses the point if that's the only thing that's looked at. Because competition is more than just a way to ration goods and services and decide who makes what income, and things of that nature.

It's fitting for me to invoke the name of F.A. Hayek in this auditorium, but as Hayek was fond of pointing out, and wrote an essay of this title, competition is a discovery procedure. It's a way we learn things, which seems pretty fitting in the context of education. It's a way we learn things we wouldn't know otherwise, and it's a way of learning things we wouldn't know otherwise from people we would never suspect would be able to teach us those things. We just don't know who is going to come up with the next good idea. And the only way to learn that is through an open, competitive system. By that, I mean a system in which entrepreneurs, providers, to use that term I don't like very much, are free to think up ideas, look for gaps in the provision of services, and come up with innovations and directly offer them to parents in this case, because they're the ones who are going to be buying education, with no bureaucracy in between. That's very important. If the bureaucracy is a filter, then we don't get the effects we should expect from a competitive system. So the competitive system is a creative system. It creates, it yields knowledge that we otherwise won't have. I mean, as Hayek pointed out, the great challenge to any society, certainly any large society, is how to get at, and marshal, and use the scattered bits of knowledge that's incomplete that's disbursed throughout the whole society. We don't know who has what idea or who's liable to come up with some idea tomorrow. The only way to get at that is to have a freely competitive system where the price system is able to operate without encumbrance by the state and entrepreneurs are free and buyers are free. In this case, parents are free to buy the services they think are best for their children. Hence the term, "parent power."

We've had the opposite. I mean, Albert Shanker has this famous quotation where he amazingly acknowledges that as he put it, "It's time to admit that the public education operates like a planned economy, a bureaucratic system in which everybody's role is spelled out in advance and there are few incentives for innovation and productivity. It's no surprise that our school system doesn't improve. It more resembles the Communist economy than our own market economy." That was a brilliant moment of insight on Shanker's part; I don't know what happened to him after that. But he certainly saw through to the nope of the problem at that moment. We have been operating schools like a centrally planned economy and we're getting, I think, the predictable results from that.

On this question of standards, it seems a little silly to me that when we live in a dynamic, largely free economy, there are certainly lots of violations of

that, that we could point out, that Cato spends a good part of its time pointing out, but certainly in the broadest terms, it's an entrepreneurial economy. Standards are being generated and all kinds of things all the time yielding stable markets and stable areas of life that people operate in perfectly well. The computer industry is a very good example of that. There have been standards, but there has also been evolution of standards. There's been neither chaos or to call chaos on the one hand, in other words, no standards, or everybody has their own standards, which is the same as no standards and dogmatism on the other hand, where there's been one standard imposed, one rigid standard imposed by a central authority. The marketplace is beautiful at navigating between those two poles and giving us competing, evolving, but at the same time, relatively stable standards that let people operate. This happens in areas where they are even more crucial than in education. For example, in the computer industry where you have a large amount of network effects, in other words, people have to, systems have to communicate with each other, people need to share files, they computer industry has been pretty darn good at enabling us to get our work done, which is what really counts.

So, it's a little odd to think only government can give us standards in education, whatever that means. People evolve institutions, which in turn evolve standards because they need those institutions to achieve objectives. They would have no interest in an educational arrangement that didn't teach anything that was the least bit useful to anybody. I compare it to language, the idea that there could be a language without standards, without rules is ridiculous because it would violate the very purpose for which the language was desired in the first place and any such language would have disappeared through some process similar to natural selection. The same thing with education, parents have some objective from getting their kids educated, whole list of objectives from what you might think is mundane (getting them prepared to make a living) to more lofty objectives. Most parents, I'm sure, have more than one objective in mind and they're going to be drawn to schools, which tend to achieve those things and out of that we're going to get what you might call standards or at least some sort of intelligibility in being able to choose schools.

The idea that only government can bring us this is really a throwback to some primitive time. The kind of idea that was embodied in old centrally planned economies, which have proven to be failures for the very reasons I'm talking about. They can't deliver the goods, it's a phony promise and I believe the Bush plan will just be seen as another, in that long string of proclamations by government where every few years officials come out and say, yes the schools are a mess and I have an idea to how to fix them and then, of course, a few years later the same thing will be said by somebody else. The next micro-generation of political operatives will be saying the same things with some little twist on how they now have finally hit on the solution. Government education cannot help but impinge on freedom of the family, of conscious (as Steven

Aarons (sp?) is so great at pointing out) and other personal liberties that we cherish. It can't help but do it. A noncontroversial curriculum is as chimerical as value free education. It's impossible, there will always be controversy, there will always be sensibilities offended, which is exactly why government should not be in the business of imposing even in a de facto way, standards and curriculum.

We separate church and state to avoid just such violations of liberty. Therefore, we should separate school and state for the very same reasons. That we can do by letting the free-market fueled by parent power provide our education.

Darcy Olsen:

Thanks Sheldon, now that's definitely something you don't hear coming out of Washington everyday. Dr. Hickok?

Dr. Eugene W. Hickok:

Thank you, first of all, for the invitation to be here. I've only been in this city now for about four weeks. I've made it a point of my life, not to be in this city too much, as a matter of fact, so I appreciate the invitation. And it's good to be back at Cato. I used to be at the Justice Department with Ed Meese and then spent some time at Heritage and am very familiar with Cato for a long time and very much appreciate all the good work that's been done here. I should offer a caveat before I begin and that is that I'm here primarily because of my past experience, not my current office, as Pennsylvania secretary of education for six years. And so my comments about the experience there and how it relates to some of the things that Alfie said or you said I hope will be good fuel for discussion, most probably [for] debate. In my views on, if it comes up, the Bush proposals (the President's proposals) are my views in terms of personal.

Having said that, let me tell you what Pennsylvania did, briefly, in how it might help us get a sense of what might happen should the majority of the Bush administration's proposals become law. As you just pointed out, this is a very fluid discussion right now on Capitol Hill, as most of you know, it's changing rapidly so we don't know what we'll end up with, if anything. So I'm going to use the basic principals of the administration's plan as was articulated during the campaign and introduced during the first week of his tenure in Washington.

Standards: I couldn't agree more, by the way, with Mr. Richman's point about government standards. In Pennsylvania our argument was, well we do have (and I hate the term, but we do have) government schools and so we have

the problem of how do you improve those schools and one thing the governor did was to appoint a commission chaired by private sector citizens from business and industry, some educators, and some school board members. Not the leaders of the (what I call) alphabet soup organizations of public education—the teacher’s unions or the school board’s association, etc. And the goal here was to have people who are the clients of education (and we’re all the client’s of education—I prefer to use the term clients rather than customers) to tell us what they think they need and what America’s students or Pennsylvania’s students seemed not to be getting. And then as a commission to help us translate that with teachers from all over Pennsylvania and professors from various disciplines from all over Pennsylvania and from outside to translate that into a set of academic standards (what I would call expectations—not a curriculum, but a statement of expectations).

I didn’t realize how controversial that was; I mean I was a college professor. For me the academic standards movement was sort of common sense. I equate the academic standards movement to a college syllabus for a course I would teach. I would never start a semester with my students without giving them a syllabus. A syllabus is a statement of expectations; some statement of what they can expect to get from me in that course; the topics that will be covered; the sequence in which they will be covered; the work load; what I expect of them; how I’m going to grade them; how I’m going to evaluate them; the topics; and in many ways was a contract, so that when they walk into that class they have a good sense of what’s going to happen during that semester. And it was a way for me (and I hate to use this term, at least in this company) to hold them accountable. That’s what grading is all about and I think college grading has been around for a long time as has testing—a way for the professor to hold the student accountable and, if truth be known, a way for the student to hold the professor accountable. That’s what the standards movement is all about in my opinion and yet it was very controversial because it is not the way public education has operated for a very long time.

Then we put together assessments: tests. I like the term “tests” and gradually we moved from norm reference tests—and I would agree with Alfie’s point that they’re some real problems with the norm reference testing—and have done more what we call a criterion reference test and I’m no testing fanatic, but the argument here is that you have standards and you base your test on those standards and periodically you assess students; you test students to determine their proficiency—their knowledge of the material. Now, I know this is controversial, but again I’m kind of surprised this is so controversial. I’m making the broad assumption, but I think it’s a safe one, that everyone in this room went to school. Probably everyone in this room went beyond high school to college; maybe graduate school or professional school. I’m willing to bet that everyone in this room took tests. I’m willing to be that everyone in this room when they got their tests back, if it was a good grade they were pleased, if it was a bad grade they tried to find out what went wrong. And then I’m willing

to bet that as the next test was scheduled that you studied to do better. That is not controversial. We heard just yesterday from civil rights groups saying that we should stop this whole testing conversation until Congress does a study of the stress levels placed on our children by testing. I was stressed as a child undergoing testing and you know what's more stressful than testing? Being dumb. Not having knowledge. That's more stressful than testing? So in my opinion, this great debate and I'm being somewhat of a caricature here on the testing aspect because the issue is not just testing, but the nature of testing and what you do with testing. But the fact is this has been a part of the way we teach and learn from day one.

Now what we did in Pennsylvania with this is something different than other states. (Alfie and I were talking about this a few minutes before the presentation.) Pennsylvania is a local control state, now the only being problem with being a local control state, in my opinion, (and I was a school board member before I became a secretary of education) is you can't really exercise much local control if you don't have adequate information on which to base decisions. And so rather than have a test that was going to determine whether a student could go on to the next grade or a test that would determine whether a student could graduate from high school, we in Pennsylvania decided not to do that. We, instead, decided to periodically assess students and then create incentives for students if they excel on the tests, over a period of time they get certificate of recognition if they choose to put it on their diploma.

If students are having a difficult time we put together opportunities to bring them up to proficient levels: additional resources, additional instruction, mentoring, etc. You mentioned Read to Succeed, I think. Schools that habitually, over time—not just one test, one particular year, are chronically under-performing based on that indicator and several others... We put together a whole new package of laws called "Empowerment" that helps turn those schools around using them and their ideas and other ideas and new resources. And if over time your students are doing very well—again more than one test over a number period of years we created incentives to celebrate success. Just a couple of falls ago, I had the opportunity to visit high schools all over Pennsylvania that were having pep rallies on a Friday in autumn—nothing new about that, in fact, it was kind of fun. But the pep rallies were to celebrate academic success. He's shaking his head and I guess we shouldn't celebrate academic success, I see nothing wrong with that.

We also, going back to the issue of knowledge, we also decided that, again, you can't make smart decisions as a parent, as an educator, as a taxpayer if you don't have adequate knowledge. And so you can go to the Web page of the state of Pennsylvania and with the click of your mouse can get an in-depth profile, not a report card, of every school in Pennsylvania. A profile that describes curriculum offerings, library holdings, technology, student-

teacher ratios, SAT scores (if it's the highest school), state assessment scores (if it's not), graduation rates, drop-out rates, the good, the bad and the ugly. We got close to five million hits on our Web page the last month I was there. Now again it wasn't report card, but it was a way for parents/people to look at schools and start making comparisons and, again, I agree with you Mr. Richman. Frankly, in an ideal world we would be much more serious about changing this whole nature of our understanding of education. In an ideal world I think we would get away from the monopoly model. Governor Ridge and I are very, very strong supporters of school choice, of vouchers, (terrible word "vouchers"), of charter schools, of tax credits for families who want to send their kids to nonpublic schools. We are all about attempting to deal with a system (and I will agree with Mr. Kohn on this) in which we have an educational emergency. We just differ on what the nature of that emergency is. But we also have to be involved in the practical politics of change.

In Pennsylvania having charter schools, it may be easy in some places, but it was a tremendous challenge, but we did it. And you now have more students in charter schools—it will be the third largest district in the state if it was one district—close to 70 charter schools in two and a half years with a waiting list of over 14,000. And as you know, President Bush proposes to support charter schools in his budget and his education package. So I guess my response to that kind of argument is you need to be willing to accept where we are in this debate; the challenges that we have; and then seek to change the nature of public education, in my opinion, by first of all educating the public about the nature of public education today and then try to change the system through a variety of approaches. And we think in Pennsylvania and I think under President Bush accountability is a big part of that. Testing provides information that can guide instruction. Testing provides information that can help teachers and parents understand where the challenges are for students and for buildings and for districts. A wooden approach to testing; a mindless approach to testing is not in anyone's best interest.

A couple of other things and then we'll have a chance for give and take. You also have to pay attention to the teaching profession. As much as a standards based approach is a change in the education culture, so it demands a change in the preparation of teachers. I'm a big fan of arguing that we need to make sure that teachers as they are being prepared, for what I consider the most important task in a democracy, get to know the subject their supposed to teach and preferably in the same place as students who are majoring in that subject. Math teachers, certainly secondary school math teachers, should be taking courses in math departments with math majors and the same courses. I'm not saying pedagogy doesn't matter, but I am saying that content matters and it matters a lot in a standards based environment.

Finally, what we need to be doing as well, and it's something that I'm very proud of in Pennsylvania and I think that debate will be joined up here in

Washington at a different level, I hope, is we need to find ways to deal with this fixation, this fascination, this obsession, we have in this country with one issue as the issue that will solve our educational problems: money. I'm not saying money doesn't matter. The budget under Governor Ridge did grow pretty tremendously and if you look at President Bush's proposed budget as someone pointed out (I think maybe you did or you did) the largest increase is in the department of education and education generally. And the debate on the Hill right now is about how much money as well as accountability, but the fact is as much as money matters, and it does, if you look at how much we have spent in this nation and you look at performance levels on any indicator that investment is not returning much.

Now Pennsylvania in another couple of weeks, you will have like Michigan, which is the only other state, a report (and this is real dangerous stuff) issued by Standard & Poors of every school district in the state. A report of performance as a function of spending. Now it's not wooden analysis where you just look at a test score. Standard & Poors did an analysis that includes all the data available on performance and a variety of indicators and on spending and a variety of indicators and on socio-economic variables among districts. And it's not a ranking, but for the first time at least in Pennsylvania and in Michigan, people who make decisions [tape stopped here] where the numbers take us, which is what we should always do in education and public policy. And if it means we should spend more money here, well, I'm no longer a Pennsylvanian, but I'm willing to bet they'll do that. But I'm also willing to bet that what it'll say is this, in some places a lot of money is not buying very much and in some places not much money is giving you a tremendous return and all I'm saying about that information and the debate about accountability and testing is all of this is part of a growing and necessary response to an educational dilemma in this country. No single answer is the silver bullet. It's all part of the package, but we need to be thinking seriously about asking fundamental questions about results and performance and then have the guts to deal with the answers we get to those questions. Thank you.

Darcy Olson:

I promised our speakers that I'd give them two minutes (two minutes tight) to respond to anything they felt that they really needed to respond to and then we'll open it up to Q&A. Hopefully, we'll have a good twenty minutes for you to get your questions in. Go ahead and do your responses from where you're seated and let's begin in the same order that we spoke.

Alfie Kohn:

Here's what the research says about grades: when you have students focusing on getting better grades three things tend to happen reliably. I invite

you to check me out here by looking at the primary sources. First, students tend to think less deeply about what they're doing, less critically, creatively and effectively when their point is to get an A or a high test score than when they are engaging with the learning itself. Number two, students tend to pick the least challenging tasks when given a choice. Not because they're lazy but because they're rationale. Obviously, if I pick a shorter book my chance of getting an A goes up and when kids are told the point is to improve their grades they understand the point is not to stretch themselves. And third, when you emphasize grades and test scores, the research finds unanimously that, without any studies to the contrary, to the best of my knowledge, kids become less interested in the learning itself. Intrinsic motivation the desire to keep figuring stuff out is the greatest casualty of the sort of corporate model incentives and sanctions based testing driven traditional approach to education. Where even the successful students who get the A's please their parents, jump through the hoops, turn in the homework and get into expensive colleges may hate every minute of it and those are the success stories. Let alone the kids who when they fail figure that they are helpless to do anything about it and come to see themselves as failures at an early age. The notion that the choices between celebrating success or not is based on a confusion of genuine success with higher scores on tests. The notion that it's worse to be dumb is based on another false dichotomy. The genuine intellectual growth is the same thing as higher grades and test scores. This movement in general is not about helping all kids to become successful in the broader richer sense of what success means.

In New Jersey a particular middle school I'm aware of was drilled to do well on a particular standardized test and they held pep rallies and they gave the kids breakfast, but only on test day (think about the message that sends) and they talked about how we're gonna beat this test and we know you can do it and you know what they did. They had the highest score in the district, in fact, in the county on that test and they celebrated well into the night and when those kids got to high school one out of three needed intense remediation. Because not only was it not effective in a meaningful intellectual sense to focus on doing well on the test it detracted from their ability to attend to what really does lead to meaningful intellectual success.

And finally, with respect to who benefits from all of this I would invite you to perform this thought experiment. Imagine that in your state virtually all the students next year pass your state's test. What is the likely response from the governor, the state legislature, the state board of education and the editorialists from your newspapers? Are they going to say "Damn, these teachers are good?" or are they likely to say, "The tests are too easy, the standards are too low, we need to raise the bar?" If the latter is the logical response that you think would happen, what does that mean? It means that when these folks talk about higher standards, what they apparently mean is standards that all kids will never be able to reach because if they are able to

reach it that would be prima facie evidence that the standards were too low and that finally means that this tougher standards movement is about creating a sorting device[, which is] far from leaving no kid behind. It's about leaving no kid untested, so that we can force some kids to be left behind.

Darcy Olsen:

Thank you. Sheldon?

Sheldon Richman:

I'll just make a quick remark somewhat related to what Mr. Hickok had to say. The Cato Institute is unique for a lot of reasons, but one reason that comes to mind is it's one of the few places in town where the Constitution is something other than simply an antiquarian interest. So let me say something I could have said in my opening remarks, but the time was a little short. Federal activity in the educational area is unconstitutional—just to put it bluntly. The Constitution sets up a system of enumerated powers, limited number of powers, [where] as Madison put it “the powers are few and defined” and he knew something about the Constitution. The word education doesn't appear in the Constitution. There's no authority for the government to be spending money in this area, to mandate anything, [or] to dangle carrots in order to get local schools to do things. It's all really out of bounds and it's about time that someone other than just us folks here rediscover that fact.

Darcy Olsen:

Thanks. Dr. Hickok?

Dr. Eugene W. Hickok

I read a bit of Madison in my years as well and you're right, obviously, about what the Constitution doesn't say with regard to education or the framers or most of our constitutional law, but the fact is that doesn't matter. As much as we might wish it did, the fact is we have a federal role and a federal budget and a federal department and so I guess my response given that what can we do to make sure that it does no damage and tries to do what it can to improve the quality of education. I guess that's the practical politics running up against the academic background, at least for me anyway. And I'll be honest with you this issue [is] not just Washington, but the idea of working in the bureaucracy, as I listen to my two colleagues at the panel, I feel like I'm a real bad guy because I like accountability [so] I'm a bureaucrat, but I'd like to make the argument that we have to start somewhere and I think practical politics demand that we do that.

One last thing about grading, again I think what you point out, Alfie, is an example of what bad teaching in a grading system whether it's testing or not, assessments or not leads to. If my students are taking my course and watching their grades purely because of the grades they're not going to learn what they need to learn. So part of my job is to put those grades in context, put their performance in context and make sure that every grade is a part of education and learning and not just something that they're trying to get. And if I don't do that I'm not a good teacher and if I don't do that they're not going to get the education they deserve. So we can put out all these kinds of examples of very bad things happening to kids, but the fact is, often they are happening because of inadequate conduct by teachers or school boards or school districts. You know this is a people issue in the end and we're talking about people doing a better job of educating other people.

Darcy Olsen:

I've seen a lot of smiles, a lot of squishy eyebrows and some jaw dropping. I know there's some questions out there. I'd like you to raise your hand [and] we'll have a staff member come around and bring the microphone to you. Please wait for the microphone and if there's a particular person you'd like to direct your question to please say so and if you're comfortable, please identify who you are.

Q&A:

Christine Hall with CNS News:

I was hoping each of the panelists might address what you think the responsibility of parents is because whether you're talking about a world of government controlled education or standardized testing, it seems to me that some parents have found an alternative solution—home schooling, private schools and maybe some other options. So if a parent doesn't like the type of education that is provided what are their responsibilities from day one in trying to figure out what they might want or what direction they might want to go in?

Darcy Olsen:

Panelists try to keep your answers to a minute, if you would.

Dr. Eugene W. Hickok:

In my opinion, first of all, parents have a fundamental responsibility with regard to education. I think it's critical and the studies demonstrate that, but the only way they can make smart decisions about their child's education is to make sure they have adequate information on that education and alternatives

that are out there. It's one of the sad developments in this country that a lot of the public is disconnected from public education, if you will because we've allowed it to become primarily the operations of the education establishment. And so anything we can do and you can do to reconnect people to education so that they can make important choices and then [it can] give them more choices to make.

Alfie Kohn:

I think the responsibility of parents first is to reflect hard on the respects in which our traditional assumptions about education, including the way we were taught, may not be best. It's a very disturbing possibility that what we did when we were kids was exactly as pointless as we suspected it was at the time and so our responsibility is to learn more about learning. Second responsibility as parents is not to be solitary and say what's best for my kid and what will I purchase in the marketplace for him or her, but to join with other parents and think about what's best for our kids and how can we make that happen. And third, it's to speak up and if we see things that don't make sense, if we see our kids not just stressed, which is then dismissed callously, but kids throwing up out of terror that they're not going to do well on a standardized test, to make it clear that that is unacceptable and too in delegations make it clear that there are other alternatives and to learn about it. There was a study done outside of Denver where parents, when they were asked, [said] yes, we have to hold schools accountability; yes, we want standardized tests until they were shown alternatives to standardized tests -- what is called authentic assessment where kids can demonstrate what they know. And on reflection when they were informed consumers, if we must, they then said that stuff is much more meaningful and informative -- now I'm not in favor of standardized tests. They have to learn more.

Sheldon Richman:

It's almost entirely the parent's responsibility. We expect parents to select the menus for their child's diet, to buy their shoes properly and all these other things. And the food stores and the shoe stores are accountable to the parents—if the parents don't like the service their getting from those things they can turn around and go across the street without any bureaucrats permission. That's what we need in the education context. A quick reference to what Alfie was just saying—I think it's a mistake to portray parents selecting education in the marketplace as somehow atomistic. This whole atomistic, individualists model was a straw man to begin with. I'm a believer in molecular individualism. What happens, you can see it in the home schooling context and you can also see it in the private school context, parents don't just say I'm only selecting for my child. They are immediately involved in a network with other parents and other children in a cooperative enterprise even it's profit

driven by the provider, which is the way markets always operate. So I didn't want to let stand the comment that the parent is just so narrowly looking at only his own child and that he goes out and buys something off the shelf and that's it and he goes home and then he doesn't pay any attention to anything else.

Ben Woldowski with U.S. News & World Report:

If I could I'd like to squeeze in two quick questions, one for Gene Hickok and one for Alfie Kohn. For Gene Hickok, this week the administration has been widely circulating a chart showing vastly increased federal education spending [someone says, "I've got it with me if you want to see it."] and relatively flat reading scores, yet at the same time the administration is boasting about it's record increase or what's alleged to be a record increase in federal education spending, so if spending is so ineffective why are you bragging about increasing spending? And a quick question for Alfie Kohn, is simply, to make sure I understand you correctly, are you opposed to letter grades as well as being opposed to standardized testing?

Dr. Eugene W. Hickok:

Thanks for the question. This is the chart you're talking about by the way. The blue is the increase spending, not just in federal dollars, but in total spending in this country in education since 1984. The red, relatively flat are the nap scores. Indeed, the blue goes much higher if you look at budget negotiations, etc. One reason I think that we make that point is that there are those on the Hill who are arguing, "yes, you spent a lot; yes, we need to spend a whole lot more" -- a whole lot more. Initially, they were talking about an 80 percent increase over the most recent federal dollar -- 80 percent increase. Now our response is, "well, we are proposing to do things differently that will cost some money and we are responsible enough to propose that a new budget include money to help get that done." However, more money in the amounts their talking about billions and billions of dollars has not produced the results you need to have. So our argument is money counts and we're proposing more money, but before you spend a whole lot more money you've got to change the way you do things. To do other than that, just to throw more money at it is irresponsible.

Alfie Kohn:

And my answer is, yes, the research overwhelmingly suggests that traditional letter grades get in the way of challenge, of deep thinking, and of interest, but that doesn't mean that we don't provide feedback about how well students and teachers are doing. Just as tests both standardized and in-class versions are not very useful ways of gathering information about student

achievement, so letter and number grades are not very informative ways of communicating that achievement or its absence and the most effective schools in the country have eliminated letter grades and provided narrative accounts as well as conferences with both kids and teachers, so there is an opportunity for a conversation about how's my kid doing, what's my kid doing, and how can it be more effective next month?

Steve Lappo from the National Conference for the Social Studies:

My first question will be for Dr. Hickok. Well, it's kind of a two-part question. I haven't looked carefully at all the Standard & Poor's data, but I'd be worried about one conclusion you could draw from that, which is you're getting the best return for your dollar in the richest neighborhoods and hey let's send more money, therefore, to the rich neighborhoods because if you've ever worked with the poor, it's tough. You might not show a good return for your dollar, but I would believe that the state and the nation should send the best teachers and put the most money where there is the greatest need. And it doesn't matter what the Standard & Poor's data shows and test scores don't help you to do that.

In Maryland, I think now I'd like to switch to [being] just a PTA parent, this is not coming from my professional position, that I've been looking at the Maryland State performance and assessment program tests that the kids are taking and the state has tried to come up with a more advanced test that would be worth teaching to. A valuable test that is open-ended questions, the kids get together in the middle of the class and work on a problem and then go to their seats and answer the tests questions and I'll tell you this test is a mess. It is a wreck and their attacking schools in Maryland because the kids are Hispanic and they have a hard time answering questions in long phrases. My question is that nobody can criticize this because the teachers and the principals and the school districts are all evaluated by the state and the state has written this horrible test which has no validity, no reliability and the only people that are free to criticize it are parents. I just wonder, in terms of how government works if nobody in the state is free to criticize this thing, is it wise to have the state writing the test that evaluates teachers and kids.

Dr. Eugene W. Hickok:

On the state test, I'm not that familiar with Maryland. I know I see their annual report card on the state, which makes it look like they're doing great things -- I have no idea if they are. But, again, I think it's an example of the worse kind of operations. If you have a state, or school board, or school district that, first of all, assumes it has the corner-on-the-market of wisdom on what's going on in education and doesn't do a good job of doing what is its first and fundamental responsibility—listening to its citizens. I mean in Pennsylvania

as we develop standards and developed tests we did that with citizens and we revised them with citizens from all walks of life because after all it's their children. So I guess to me, if what you say is accurate, I can't comment on the quality of the testing that reflects, if what you say is accurate, a real problem with a lot of government entities. They think they have the answer.

On the S&P thing, any information that has got data that is verifiable, that is presented to decision makers and I argue parents most of all as decision makers in a way that is understandable is going to an improvement over a lot of what we don't know about education and it might help us understand where we should send our better teachers or where our better teachers are and where they need to be. That is now primarily anecdotal, episodic information and so what we need to do all over this country is find better ways of collecting information, providing it to everybody in a way that makes it impossible to ignore failure and makes it easier to emulate success.

Darcy Olsen:

I'm going to a liberty of being a moderator and just quickly say that the Cato short answer to your question is that this is one of the reason that we believe so strongly that every parent should have a choice of where they send their kids to school because just one reason is that it is so difficult to get around the bureaucracy and to get what it is you think you need for your child.

Joe McTyge from CAPE ("Council for America Private Education"):

I have got a daughter in ninth grade in a local school. She's taking an algebra course, she comes home every three or four months with a letter grade (A, B, C) and I know that's subjective information. I mean a B in her school doesn't necessarily mean a B in some other school and doesn't represent the same level of work. Indeed it doesn't represent the same level of work in another section in the same school. So I'm looking for some objective information as to whether or not my daughter has mastered the skills she needs to know in algebra and I also want to know how she's doing relative, not only to the other kids in her class, but also to other kids in the state, other kids in the country, and, indeed, other kids in other countries. I mean it's well and good to talk about genuine academic success, genuine intellectual growth, but what are the objective standards for that. How do you know when my daughter has reached genuine intellectual growth?

Alfie Kohn:

Well, you certainly don't know it by turning it into a sorting system where it's a matter of whom am I beating, which is the underlying question that informs international rankings, state rankings, school rankings in a state and

so on. It's not are our kids learning, it's who's defeating whom. And the results of a norm reference test always come out exactly the same way, regardless of how good the teaching was or how much the kid studied. Exactly ten percent will score in the top ten percent and half will always look like failures because they're below the median. That's what happens when it's about relative success. As a parent myself, I want not to set an example for my child of saying I want to know whether you're better than those other kids. The moment I start to frame it in those terms where it's about victory, not about excellence and those two are completely different concepts, the more I am, I think, setting a poor role model for my kid in terms of saying it's about defeat. And then somebody has to lose and it's also about my saying that I'm not interested anymore in the quality of education itself.

The hunt for, now let's put aside the question of relative, how people stack up, and let's look at quality. Looking for an objective measure is a fool's errand. It doesn't exist. What you can do, you can give the same stupid test to everybody, but that doesn't make the information more valuable. You can make it immediately understandable to kids. Ahh! And to parents. I'm better than 87.6 percent of the others. You haven't provided useful information and you've changed the debate, so now it's about what can we do to be better than even more of those people so they'll lose and I won't. There are more and less useful forms of providing information. If your child can use algebra to construct something that makes sense—an equation that will help her redesign her bedroom, so that she's using the facts and skills for something that matters in the real world and she's doing it with her classmates, and she can apply this to what she's also studying in literature and projects or exhibitions of mastery are used then you have the information you need about how successful algebra was. You don't get that information from a grade. But the real danger of grades is not just that they're not useful or that they're subjective. The real danger is that kids become focused on the grades rather than on the learning itself and you and I immediately can see that a B+ doesn't mean the same thing for one class or school to the next or one year to the next. What makes standardized testing so dangerous is that it has an aura of objectivity because their machines scored and reported out to a decimal place, so they look scientific even though their based on some of the same kinds of dubious premises that grades are.

Unknown Speaker:

Isn't it elusive to talk about academic excellence if there's not objective way of measuring [unable to decipher]?

Alfie Kohn:

My favorite quote on this comes from Linda McNeal at Rice University, who, by the way, just published a book detailing the nightmare that is Texas education from her post at Rice University in Houston. She said measurable outcomes may be the least significant results of learning. I didn't get a chance to get into this, but I would argue strongly that the problem is not just with the construction of the tests and their weaknesses, but with our sort of reflexive, knee jerk assumption that if it's not reduced to numbers, you have no information. You know it's a lot easier to have a count of the number of times a semi-colon is used correctly in an essay than to measure the number of wonderful ideas in that essay. So the more driven you are by the need to quantify the more you dumb down schooling to that which can easily be quantified.

Darcy Olsen:

Okay, we have a few minutes left, so let's keep our questions and our answers both short. Dr. Lieberman, please wait for the microphone.

Byron Lieberman with the Education Policy Institute:

I hate to ask my question because it's a little bit like a test, but Mr. Kohn, you've said about the time that these tests take. You were factual and wanted to be on some others, but in all this discussion you did not give us any facts about how much the standardized testing takes. So I'd like to have you answer this and one other question. What is your reference for how much time they take? I don't want to know your opinion of it I want to know what reference you rely on mostly for your answer to that and then the other one was... Well, I just drop it there because we're running out of time.

Alfie Kohn:

Different tests at different grade levels in different states take different amounts of time. For example, I was just yesterday speaking in New York where eighth graders have to take 13.5 hours of tests, that's longer than the state bar exam incidentally. It's in other states you might find them taking tests of three hours at a time by three days and they might have to do that every blessed year. In Chicago, from in a period of a year and a half, some kids end up taking 12 different standardized tests of varying lengths. But what I want to emphasize is not just the time lost during the time their taking the test, but the time and opportunities lost spent preparing kids for standardized tests instead of for doing things that might be more educationally useful.

Dr. Niskanen from the Cato Institute:

Mr. Kohn you have asserted that grading and testing selects against deep thinkers. For our understanding could you identify one or two deep thinkers who did badly in school?

Alfie Kohn:

Albert Einstein is a famous example.

Dr. Niskanen from the Cato Institute:

It was not correct. It is also a false analogy.

Alfie Kohn:

It's not an analogy.

Dr. Niskanen from the Cato Institute:

Give me an understanding, other than quoting somebody, give me a sense of who you would regard as a deep thinker in a field who has done badly or been selected against by grading and testing.

Alfie Kohn:

Well, I guess part of what we'd have to talk about is what constitutes deep thinking.

Dr. Niskanen from the Cato Institute:

I'm asking you what you regard as deep thinking.

Alfie Kohn:

You know, the answer is the people who really impress me as deep thinkers, I don't happen to know their educational histories, but I do know that when I speak and ask folks all over the country, I find that teachers constantly tell me about kids they know to be deep thinkers who just aren't good test takers. And that often, although the teachers don't often see this immediately, the converse is true as well. That there are kids who do really well on tests, but don't understand why the answers are right. I'm an example of that in math. My test scores when I was a kid were super and my understanding was superficial. I could tell you how you divide by a fraction, but I couldn't tell you why because my education was traditional. It wasn't about meaning. But I'm sure given time if I interviewed some of the folks I know whose thinking I

happen to respect deeply that they did very poorly on conventional tests. People come up to me anecdotally all the time and I have to take their word for it. Some of them are more successful than others in conventional terms, but many of them told me if I was judged by my test scores I would never have been able to graduate let alone be successful. Thank goodness there were no exit exams when I went to school.

Dr. Niskanen from the Cato Institute:

Why is it then that grades and test scores have proven such good predictors of later success?

Alfie Kohn:

Oh, they're not. Good God. Two hundred corporate executives just said last week that four percent in a poll of business leaders said they look at standardized test scores as an important indicator of the likelihood of success in life. Ninety-six percent said it's other characteristics that aren't measured in standardized tests. If you want to look statistically, SAT scores only predict about 15 percent of freshman grades and predict zero of what happens after they leave.

Dr. Eugene W. Hickok:

Just real briefly, we can debate standardized tests, grading, and all the accoutrement of education that have been around since education started in this country. You need to realize, what makes me think about this is this comment about over quantification, how many semicolons. We're dealing with students in this country who don't know how to write the sentence or to read the sentence. We've got to get serious about this and we can debate all this stuff, but the fact is that data tells us, the parents tell us, the employers tell us, it's obvious we've got a crisis here. Quantification or no quantification, we've got to get off the dime here and get serious.

Darcy Olsen:

Okay, I have time here for two more questions. One is in the back.

Unknown Speaker:

I have the feeling that this is not only about standardization that we need to focus. The reason is that I think the quality of education is the most important thing. Genuine intellectual growth because in countries or downtown countries in France they have the standardized program, standardized test and their quality of education is high and the people of

minorities in their systems and the people in Paris have the same level. So I think that is not the problem of our standardization, but is a problem about equality of education. Could you please answer for me that Mr. Kohn?

Darcy Olsen:

That's not really a question.

Alfie Kohn:

Is the question whether I agree with you?

Unknown Speaker:

The question is it is not about the standardization [that] is the problem. It is about the quality of education. If you think that it's not right, then please explain more.

Alfie Kohn:

I think standardization is one contributor to low quality education because it removes from professional educators and students the ability to design the kind of high quality education in their own classrooms. Never mind school choice in the usual sense. Let's talk about the amount of choice that kids and teachers have to figure out the projects that will help them understand deeply. Now it is true that nationalized systems of education in other countries are no predictor of high quality. There is no real correlation there one way or the other, but I think that standardization is one of the problems that helps to explain why education is not as deep and rigorous and engaging as it could be.

Darcy Olsen:

Sheldon has a response and then I want to...

Sheldon Richman:

I want to return just quickly to the institutional point. This is an interesting debate. I think it's a very interesting debate. The question is though in what institutional context should this debate be resolved, if it ever will be resolved. To put it another way, I don't want the Kohn approach to education imposed by a bureaucrat any more than I want the Hickok approach to education imposed by a bureaucrat. Let the competitive discovery process where parents are choosing and entrepreneurs are free to make offerings. Let that solve this problem and I think what we'll end up with is some form of co-

existence. I mean I don't know how it'll eventually play out and I don't know what kind of school there will be. There will be a variety of schools, but parents who want traditional schools, as wrong headed as that may be, should be able to choose them and parents that want a nontraditional school should be free to choose that and then we will see. That's the way in a free society we should resolve such debates. Not by having somebody impose somebody's vision on everybody else.

Caleb Kirshner with the Home School Legal Defense:

I have a couple of statistics I'd like to read you.

Darcy Olsen:

Keep it real short and one question.

Kirshner:

It will be very brief. This will be a softball for Mr. Richman, but I'd like you all just to briefly comment on it. There are actually 2 million home-schoolers in America. Home-schoolers are very pro-parent; they have a wide variety of backgrounds including doctorates, undergraduates, including some who have high school degrees and some who do not; they spend less than \$600 per student and the average public school student is at the average of about \$8,000 per student; they do test; they use a wide variety of teaching methods and we find no difference in test scores or academic excellence for their wide variety of backgrounds and on average home-schoolers score in the 80th percentile. Plus we find no difference in their scores based upon government regulations. From your opinion on your theory of effective education, why do you think home-schoolers are doing so well?

Darcy Olsen:

I'd like to start with Dr. Hickok and just go down the panel and then this will be it. We're going to wrap it up.

Dr. Eugene W. Hickok:

I'm a big fan of home-schooling; Pennsylvania has a very large home-schooling population. It's growing and I think it's growing for a number of reasons. One reason I think they do well and I think most of your data is accurate. One reason they do well is because there's a focus that reflects a fundamental sense on the part of parents and their kids of the importance of what they're doing; the relevance of what they're doing to everyday life; they're connected. It's not something you go to, sit down and then come back. It's

woven into their very life and that, I think is one reason it works and I would argue that's the lesson we can learn from home-schoolers that all of education could benefit from.

Alfie Kohn:

The conclusion is based on a mistake about statistics. This is a self-selected group. If they score higher, let's assume for the moment that the standardized test that you're relying on is useful because mostly they're not, but let's assume for the sake of the argument that these tests are telling us something. It's probably because of something about the parents who chose to home-school in the first place. It doesn't mean that if you took a bunch of kids and home-schooled some of them and then randomly assigned others to schools that the home-school kids would do better. I don't know if whether that's true. I think it would depend in large part in whether they're just recreating the worse kind of bunch-o-facts education using text books around the kitchen table or not, so it would be that approach. So it's more than meaningless it's misleading to say that home-schoolers do well because you haven't controlled for who decided to home-school in the first place.

Sheldon Richman:

Well, I think there's a lot of tailoring to the individual child in home schooling. There's a lot of flexibility as far as the time of day and all that. I mean all those good things that reflect freedom at the micro-level (at the family level). My kids are home-schooled. They don't take any standardized tests that aren't demanded by the state—it's the minimal stuff. They don't get grades and I think a lot of home-schoolers probably lean more toward Alfie's approach toward education because, first of all, the parent can have a good sense of whether the child is learning anything just by the contact day to day.

Darcy Olsen:

I'd like to thank you all for coming out. I'm sorry, there were a few of you I couldn't get to your questions. Please feel free to come up and talk to our speakers for as long as they'll take your questions. Thanks again for coming to Cato.