

A dozen basic guidelines for educators

By Valerie Strauss

Do we really need education policies and practices to cover everything that goes on in the classroom? Author Alfie Kohn says “no” and, below, offers basic guidelines that can really help teachers. Kohn is the author of 12 books about education and human behavior, including “The Schools Our Children Deserve,” “The Homework Myth,” and “Feel-Bad Education... And Other Contrarian Essays on Children & Schooling.”

To create the schools our children deserve, it’s probably not necessary to devise specific policies and practices for every occasion. Rather, these will follow logically from a few core principles that we devise together.

Here’s a sample list of such principles, intended to start a conversation among educators, parents, and (let’s not forget) the students themselves:

1. Learning should be organized around problems, projects, and (students’) questions — not around lists of facts or skills, or separate disciplines.
2. Thinking is messy; deep thinking is really messy. Therefore beware prescriptive standards and outcomes that are too specific and orderly.
3. The primary criterion for what we do in schools: How will this affect kids’ *interest* in the topic (and their excitement about learning more generally)?
4. If students are “off task,” the problem may be with the task, not with the kids.
5. In outstanding classrooms, teachers do more listening than talking, and students do more talking than listening. Terrific teachers often have teeth marks on their tongues.
6. Children learn how to make good decisions by making decisions, not by following directions.
7. When we aren’t sure how to solve a problem relating to curriculum, pedagogy, or classroom conflict, the best response is often to ask the kids.
8. The more focused we are on kids’ “behaviors,” the more we end up missing the kids themselves — along with the needs, motives, and reasons that underlie their actions.

9. If students are rewarded or praised for doing something (e.g., reading, solving problems, being kind), they'll likely lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward.
10. The more that students are led to focus on how well they're doing in school, the less engaged they'll tend to be with *what* they're doing in school.
11. All learning can be assessed, but the most important kinds of learning are very difficult to *measure* — and the quality of that learning may diminish if we try to reduce it to numbers.
12. Standardized tests assess the proficiencies that matter least. Such tests serve mostly to make unimpressive forms of instruction appear successful.

Source: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/10/30/a-dozen-basic-guidelines-for-educators/>