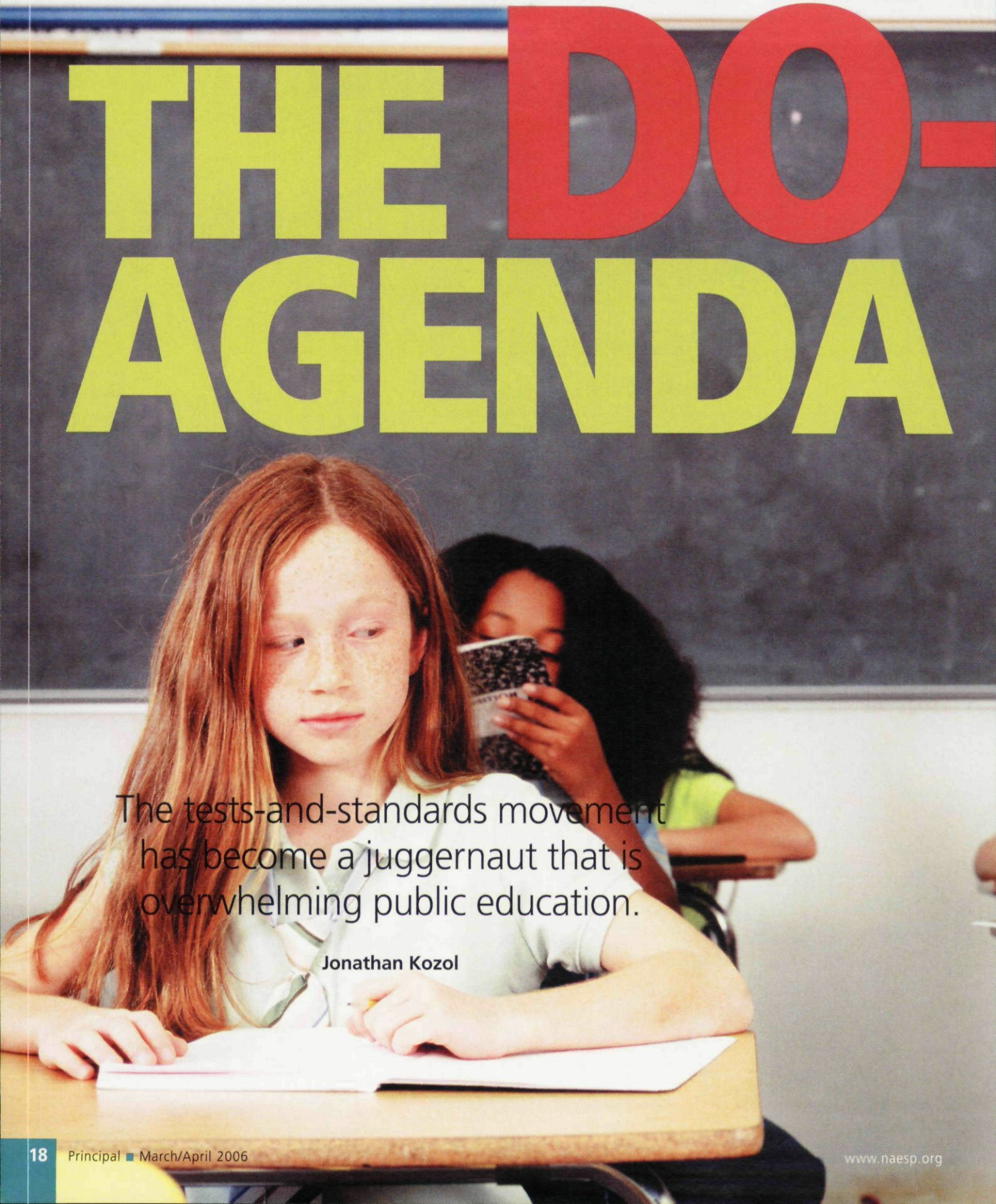
Standardized Testing: THE DO-AGENDA

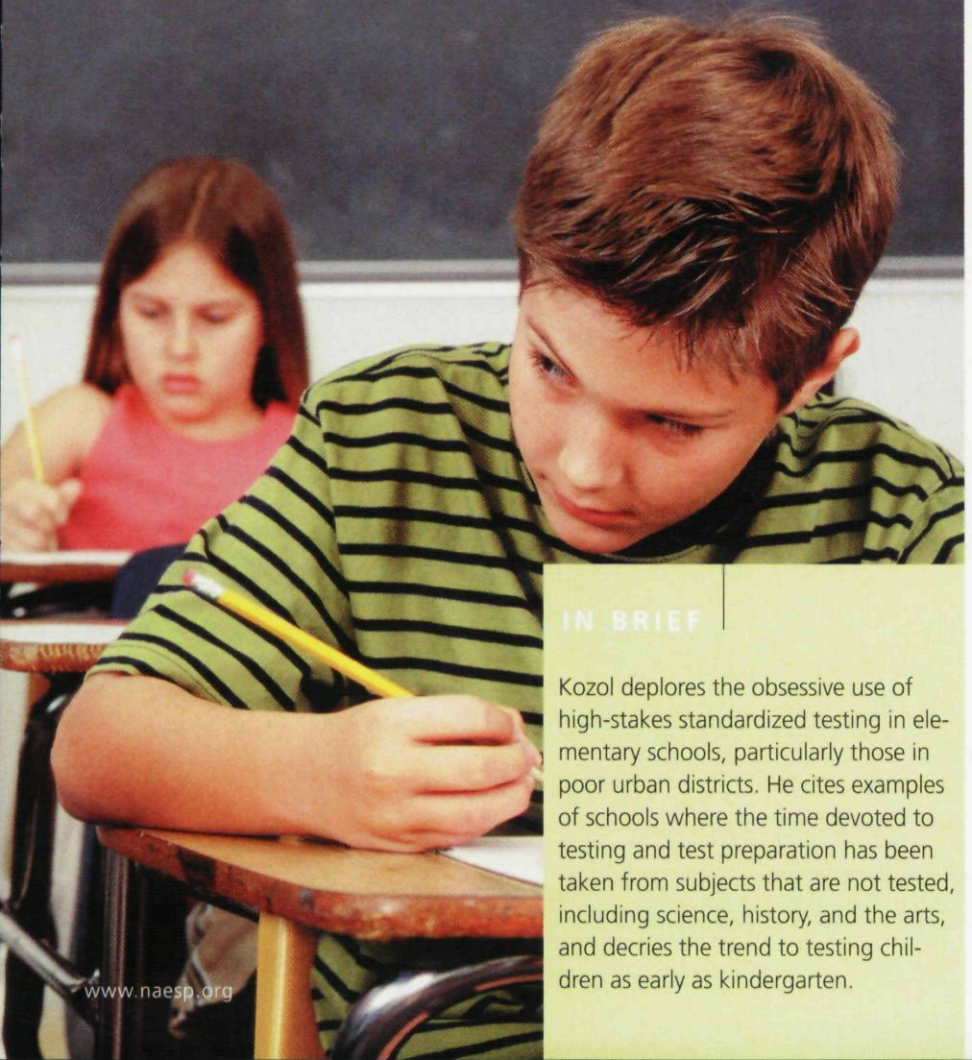


The tests-and-standards movement has become a juggernaut that is overwhelming public education.

Jonathan Kozol

OR-DIE

Even in good suburban schools where scores are generally high, I don't know many principals and teachers who believe that the repeated measuring of children's skills by standardized exams has had a positive effect upon the processes of education; I know many more who feel it has the opposite result. But, in the districts in which students as a matter of routine do relatively well, the tests do not entirely suffocate instruction.



IN BRIEF

Kozol deplores the obsessive use of high-stakes standardized testing in elementary schools, particularly those in poor urban districts. He cites examples of schools where the time devoted to testing and test preparation has been taken from subjects that are not tested, including science, history, and the arts, and decries the trend to testing children as early as kindergarten.

Teachers in the elementary grades within these districts generally feel they can allow themselves the luxury of letting youngsters wander off from time to time into a subject that holds interest for them but has no direct, or even indirect, connection with the competencies to be measured by the state.

It is a different story in too many inner-city schools, where deviations from a charted road set off alarm bells for the supervisory officials and where teachers who are not eternally "on task" are made to understand that they will bear the burden of responsibility if the percentile gains demanded, for example, by one of those school improvement plans are not attained within the time prescribed.

The Road to Rome

"If the road does not lead to Rome," said a woman who was called the "manager" of language arts for the Chicago public schools, "we don't want it followed." Rome, she said, was the examination children would be given at the end of a specific sequence of instruction (Hendrie 1997).

Most Americans whose children aren't in public schools have little sense of the inordinate authority that is now granted to these standardized exams and, especially within the inner-city schools, the time the tests subtract from actual instruction. In some schools, the principals and teachers tell me that the tests themselves and preparation for the tests control more than a quarter of the year.

At P.S. 65 [New York City], during the three months prior to the all-important state exam, fifth-grade teachers had to set aside all other lessons from 8:40 to 11 a.m., and from 1:45 to 3 p.m., to drill the children for their tests. In addition to this, two afternoons a week children in the fourth and fifth grades had to stay from 3 to 5 p.m. for yet another session of test preparation. The children were told, said one of the teachers, that "it's not just 'important' that they pass," but that "passing this—the test—is actually the only thing that is important."

In some cities, these examinations start as early as kindergarten or first grade. Four years ago in Santa Paula, California, for example, kindergarten children were required to take standardized exams beginning in the last week of September. Two weeks, in all, were taken up by these exams, which school officials said they had to give to qualify for extra funding from the federal government (Ragland 2001).

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Front-loading Children

There is a new pedagogic term for introducing children to these testing practices at a very early age. The term, according to a teacher-educator in Ohio, is "front-loading children," a usage that appears to have originated in the world of capital investment.

No matter how offensive this may be to teachers, school officials often feel they have no choice but to apply these practices during the first two years of school. In Alabama, for example, where kindergarten children are required to take standardized exams three times in the academic year, officials in one district did away with "nap time" so that teachers would have extra time to get the students ready for their tests (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution* 2003).

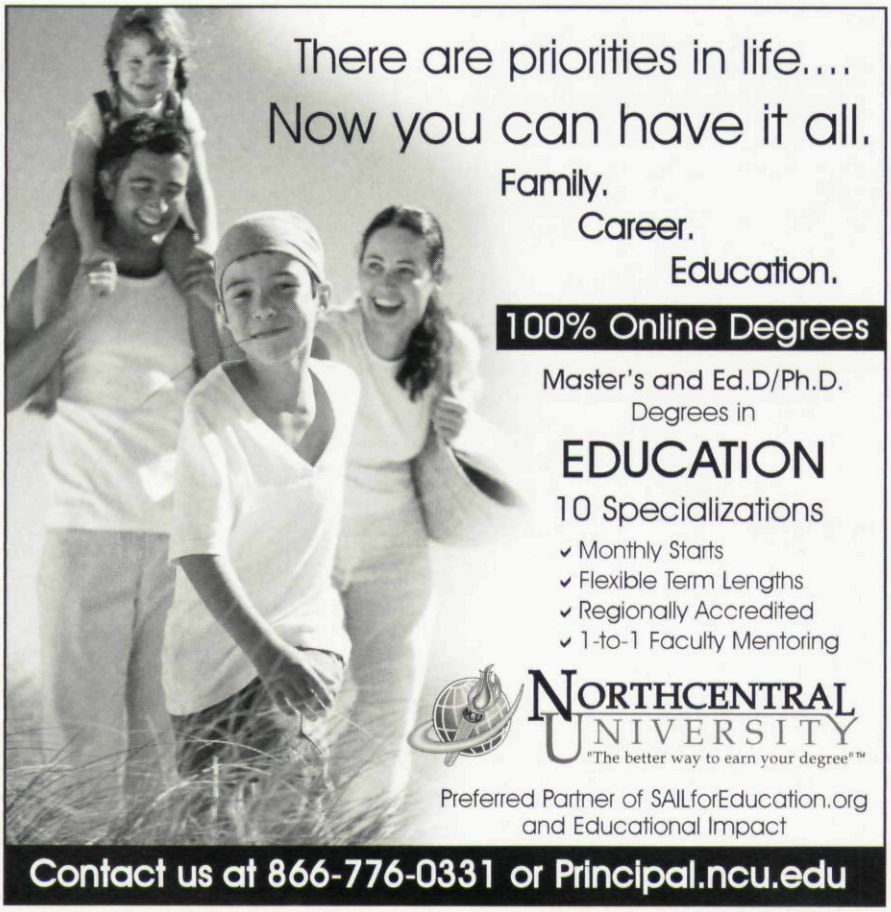
The usual administrative rationale for giving tests like these to children in their elementary years is that the test results will help to show their teachers where the children's weaknesses may lie, so that they can redirect the focus of their work in order to address these weaknesses. In practice, however, this is not the way things generally work, because of the long lapse in time between the taking of these tests and the receipt of scores.

A Different Kind of Test

There is an entirely different kind of early testing in which the results are instantly available to teachers because the tests are given individually to children, so that teachers can observe the difficulties they face and can assess their strengths and weaknesses during the administration of the test itself. I recently watched a teacher giving one such diagnostic test, known as the ECLAS [Early Childhood Literacy Assessment System], to a student in her second grade. The student was relaxed and seemed to like the private time and personal attention the teacher gave him. Although the teacher had to draw on her ingenuity to keep the rest of the children occupied with independent work while she was doing this, she did not view it as time stolen from instruction.

There is no "test prep" for these kinds of genuine assessments. Teachers would have no reason to drill children in advance because the purpose of these tests is not to judge the child or the teacher, but to gather information that is helpful to them both.

This is not the case with high-stakes standardized examinations, the results of which supplant and overrule the judgments of the teacher. "What worries me most," writes Deborah Meier, "is that in the name of objectivity and science," the heavy reliance upon high-stakes testing has led teachers "to distrust their ability to see and observe" the children



they are teaching and derive conclusions *based* upon their observation.

"We cannot trust such tests," she writes, "to determine an individual's competence or the success of any particular school, district, or state, or to determine the worth of any school reform or set of school reforms. We can win occasional short-term public relations victories...by improving testable skills, but in the end such victories will be at the price of a good education... And meanwhile we distort the education that we offer..."(Meier 2002).

Penalizing Minorities

One of the distorting consequences that is taking an especially high toll on children of minorities, Meier notes, is the increasing practice of compelling children to repeat a grade or several grades over the course of years solely on the basis of their test results and, in some districts, almost wholly independent of the judgments of their principals and teachers.

There is another way in which the students in increasing numbers of our low-performing urban schools are being penalized by the insistent pressure to deliver higher scores on standardized exams. In many of these schools, traditional subjects such as history, geography, and science are no longer taught because they are not tested by high-stakes examinations and cannot contribute to the scores by which a school's performance will be praised or faulted.

A principal's ability to claim that children in his or her school are learning to play violin or to read music, or performing in a dance ensemble or a choral group, will not protect the school from sanctions and humiliation if its scores in math or reading do not satisfy the stipulations of the state. Some principals in urban schools do what they can to introduce or to preserve arts programs by securing private grants and by insisting that some portion of the school day be protected from the state's empirical demands; but these are largely marginal activities and nothing like the programs of rich cultural exposure that are prized and celebrated in the schools that serve the children of the privileged.

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Farewell to Recess

The banishment of recess from the normal school day is perhaps the ultimate penurious denial. In Atlanta, recess has been systematically abandoned to secure more time for test-related programs since the last years of the 1990s (Ohanian 2002). In 80 percent of the Chicago schools, recess has been abolished also (Schudel 2001). Some of the districts that deny their children recess also deny the students they call "Level Ones" or "Level Twos" a good part of their summer holidays. Summer becomes a time when children who have not done well on standardized exams are dragged back into classrooms where they're given still more drilling in anticipation of a "retest" in September. These summer institutes of sweat and drill and tension and anxiety would not be needed for most of these children if their schools were not so flagrantly deficient in the first place.

Thomas Sobol, the former state commissioner of education in New York, who oversaw the early phases of the standards movement from the last years of the 1980s to the mid-1990s, told a group of future teachers in New York not long ago that he was troubled by the unexpected consequences to which much of this has led. "Standards," "testing," and "accountability" have come to be "the current orthodoxy," he observed. "People say we need these...standards to remain competitive in a global economy. They say we have been too lax. They say that students will rise to meet the expectations of their elders and that teachers will work harder if their feet are held to the fire. They say we will reform our schools by demanding more, and holding students and teachers accountable for the results..."

"For the record," he went on, "I believe in high standards. But history teaches us that every good idea contains the seeds of its own heresy and much of what is going on in the name of standards and accountability verges on the heretical...We are giving kids less and calling it more [by] limiting what we teach to what we can easily measure."

Reflecting on "a stifling uniformity of practice" that the testing movement has imposed on many public schools, Sobol spoke of aspects of a child's education that cannot be measured by exams. "Learning entails play and risk-taking [but] we don't have time for these things anymore." What we are giving them now in many places is a "stripped-down curriculum" and "instruction devoid of passion and meaning."

The Juggernaut Rolls On

Despite the stirrings of resistance to these policies, he said, "the juggernaut rolls on...Few of us expect it to disappear suddenly, but many of us expect it to change...Someday the frenzy will be over. Someday we will come to understand that we have been eating poisoned grain" (Sobol 2001).

I disagreed with only two points in his talk. I thought the tests-and-standards movement, as it had emerged in the middle and late 1980s, had been loaded with a coarse utilitarian toxicity and a demeaning anti-human view of childhood right from the start. I also did not share his faith that our political system would reject a set of policies that sends so many thousands of our students to the streets without high school diplomas. The political system has permitted millions of poor children to be sent into the streets without diplomas now for many generations—numbers that are almost certain to increase under the do-or-die agenda that has been enforced by nonpromotion policies. P

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Jonathan Kozol, the award-winning author of *Death at an Early Age, Savage Inequalities,* and *Amazing Grace,* has been working with children in inner-city schools for more than 40 years.

This article is excerpted with permission from his new book, *Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (Crown 2005). ©2005 by Jonathan Kozol. All rights reserved.

WEB RESOURCES

The Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice provides summaries of recent published research related to high-stakes testing, including "High-Stakes Testing and Student Achievement: Problems for the No Child Left Behind Act," by Sharon Nichols, Gene Glass, and David Berliner.
www.greatlakescenter.org/testing.htm

"Effects of State Testing Programs on Elementary Schools with High Concentrations of Student Poverty—Good News or Bad News?" by Tonya Moon, Carolyn Callahan, and Carol Tomlinson, published in *Current Issues in Education* in 2003, can be retrieved from the publication's Web site.
http://cie.asu.edu/volume6/number8/

A description of New York City's Early Childhood Literacy Assessment System (ECLAS-2) and its four strands is available online.
www.nycenet.edu/daa/ECLAS/ECLAS_info.html

FairTest, the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, an organization actively opposed to high-stakes standardized tests, has an informative and constantly updated Web site.
www.fairtest.org/index.htm

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