

# Why Can't Everyone Get A's?

Excellence is not a zero sum game.

**By Alfie Kohn**

Mr. Kohn is the author of books on human behavior and education.

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Image Credit Alvaro Dominguez



For a generation now, school reform has meant top-down mandates for what students must be taught, enforced by high-stakes standardized tests and justified by macho rhetoric — “rigor,” “raising the bar,” “tougher standards.”

Here’s a thought experiment. Suppose that next year virtually every student passed the tests. What would the reaction be from politicians, business people, the media? Would these people shake their heads in admiration and say, “*Damn*, those teachers must be good!”?

Of course not. Such remarkable success would be cited as evidence that the tests were too easy. In the real world, when scores have improved sharply, this has indeed been the reaction. For example, when results on New York’s math exam rose in 2009, the chancellor of the state’s Board of

Regents [said](#), “What today’s scores tell me is not that we should be celebrating,” but instead “that New York State needs to raise its standards.”

The inescapable, and deeply disturbing, implication is that “high standards” really means “standards that all students will never be able to meet.” If everyone did meet them, the standards would just be ratcheted up again — as high as necessary to ensure that some students failed.

The standards-and-accountability movement is not about leaving no child behind. To the contrary, it is an elaborate sorting device, intended to separate wheat from chaff. The fact that students of color, students from low-income families and students whose first language isn’t English are disproportionately defined as chaff makes the whole enterprise even more insidious.

But my little thought experiment uncovers a truth that extends well beyond what has been done to our schools in the name of “raising the bar.” We have been taught to respond with suspicion whenever all members of any group are successful. That’s true even when we have no reason to believe that corners have been cut. In America, excellence is regarded as a scarce commodity. Success doesn’t count unless it is attained by only a few.

One way to ensure this outcome is to evaluate people (or schools, or companies, or countries) relative to one another. That way, even if everyone has done quite well, or improved over time, half will always fall below the median — and look like failures.

Consider widespread complaints about a supposed epidemic of “grade inflation” in higher education, a claim often accompanied by indignant expostulations about young people’s sense of entitlement.

The reality is that even if more students today really are getting A's — arguably a dubious claim if we look at transcript data rather than self-reports, by the way — that doesn't prove these grades are inflated.

But here's the key point: Many critics don't even bother to assert that grades have risen over time or are undeserved. They simply point to how many students (in a given class or school) get A's right now, as if a sufficiently high number was objectionable on its face.

As Richard Kamber, a philosopher at the College of New Jersey, sees it, "If grades are to have any coherent meaning, they need to represent a relative degree of success."

The goal, in other words, isn't to do well but to defeat other people who are also trying to do well. Grades in this view should be used to announce who's beating whom. And if the students in question have already been sorted by the admissions process, well, they ought to be sorted again. A school's ultimate mission, apparently, is not to help everyone learn but to rig the game so that there will always be losers.

This makes no sense in any context. Perhaps, for example, we can justify rating states or nations based on the quality of their air, health care or schools, but ranking them is foolish. Relative performance tells us nothing of interest because all of them may be shamefully low — or impressively high — on whatever measure we're using. Comparative success just gives the winner bragging rights ("We're No. 1!"). And again, it creates the misleading impression of inevitable, permanent failure for some.

But boy, do we love to rank. Worse, we create artificial scarcity by giving out awards — distinctions manufactured out of thin air specifically so that some cannot get them.

Framing excellence in these competitive terms doesn't lead to improvements in performance. Indeed, a consistent body of [social science research](#) shows that competition tends to hold us back from doing our best. It creates an adversarial mentality that makes productive collaboration less likely, encourages gaming of the system and leads all concerned to focus not on meaningful improvement but on trying to outdo (and perhaps undermine) everyone else.

Most of all, it encourages the false belief that excellence is a zero-sum game. It would be both more sensible and more democratic to rescue the essence of the concept: Everyone may not succeed, but at least in theory all of us could.

Alfie Kohn is the author of several books, including "No Contest: The Case Against Competition" and "Punished by Rewards."

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