

Alliance for Childhood Update

By Joan Almon

The Alliance is developing in several directions at once. The most recent is the work we have been doing this spring on the issue of high stakes testing and the push by Congress and the President to mandate standardized tests every year for children from third to eighth grades.

The Alliance worked with a number of leading educators, child psychiatrists and psychologists, school nurses and parents to create a position statement and call for action that highlights both the educational issues and the “exponential growth of stress” in children around testing time, as one school nurse aptly put it. Among the signers are well known individuals such as David Elkind, Jane Healy, Daniel Goleman, Jonathan Kozol, Robert Coles, and Howard Gardner.

Call for Action

The call for action is directed at Congress and the President and makes the following points:

In light of the questionable benefits of high-stakes testing and its potential for long-term harm, we call on President Bush, the Congress, and educational leaders to rethink the current rush to make American children take even more standardized tests.

We call on Congress to put off making any new federal requirements for standardized testing of public school students until the health effects of such policies have been studied.

We further call on Congress to protect children by prohibiting the growing practice of making high-stakes decisions about individual students’ promotion, graduation, or placement in low-track classes on the basis of a single test score. This would put the force of law behind the currently unenforced ethical standards of the testing profession and the conclusions of the National Academy of Sciences *High Stakes* study.

Finally, we call on Congress to provide incentives for states and localities to develop alternative performance-based assessments that measure not just the ability to memorize facts but also the capacity for original thinking, real-world problem-solving, perseverance, and social responsibility. Such assessments will hold real meaning for students, parents, schools, and communities.

The full position statement, a press release and other materials can be found at the website of the Alliance at www.allianceforchildhood.net

Stress Related to Testing

One of the unique features of the Alliance’s position is the emphasis on stress related to testing. Until now, very little has been said about this and there is virtually no research describing current stress levels in children. What is known is that in general a little bit of stress can be helpful in sharpening the wits and bringing focus to the child taking a test. But when stress crosses a certain threshold, it becomes harmful physically and psychologically and can make it much more difficult for students to do well on the testing.

Jonathan Kozol, who is well known for his stirring books, *Savage Inequalities*, *Amazing Grace* and others, is a powerful voice for low-income children, especially those of the South Bronx. He participated in a press conference on the Alliance's behalf on April 25 on Capitol Hill. He described how the children of the South Bronx described to him their stress before the tests. "They threw up on the nights before their standardized exams. What a rotten thing for us to do to children! These kinds of tests have no effect at all except to make the children terrified of school."

He also pointed out the social inequities of tests by referring to the financial inequalities of education. For children in rural mountain schools perhaps \$4000 is spent on the education of each child. In inner cities, perhaps \$8000 is spent, and in the affluent suburbs perhaps \$18,000 is spent. Yet all these children within a given state will take the same test and will be expected to score at similar levels. This is simply not possible.

The problem of stress induced by testing is not only a problem for low-income children.

A school nurse in Massachusetts, where the state mandated MCAS tests are given, described the situation at her school in this way:

"I saw a lot of 4th graders in my office today; they're taking the test tomorrow. Some are truly upset and don't feel well; others are afraid of not doing well. Everybody—teachers and parents—is hysterical about this—and the tension comes across to the children. When the teachers don't particularly believe in the test, that comes across to the children. Parents are very tense about it, and that comes through too. The whole school is torn apart when they're doing MCAS—you can't disturb the 4th grade corridor, can't play on that side of the playground. It's like a prison lockdown in school when they give the test.

Teachers are obsessed with these tests. They're so anxious about this that the children pick it up. And I work in Longmeadow, a high-powered district. The kids who do well are under a lot of pressure to do even better, and the children who aren't good test-takers are falling apart.

The nurses I know talk about it a lot, because they're seeing more and more problems."

In the Alliance's press release, the following signers of the position statement were quoted:

"What started as a well motivated process to improve student learning has become an increasingly irrational high stakes endeavor," said Howard Gardner of Harvard University School of Education, originator of the theory of multiple intelligences. "Politicians may show short term gains, but students, teachers, and the learning process are becoming casualties."

"The pressure on teachers to teach to tests and outperform their colleagues is translating into stressful evenings for parents and children," added Dr. Marilyn Benoit of Howard University and president-elect of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

Beyond Testing

"Testing is really not the issue," said David Elkind, author of *The Hurried Child* and other books and a nationally known authority on child development. "Most teachers know which children are not doing well and don't need tests to tell them that. What they do need, and what there is no money or provision for, is the remediation indicated by the teacher or the test. Doing testing without providing for the remediation is like giving a serious diagnosis but declining to do the available treatment."

The testing issue is a complex one, for some sort of assessment is always needed in schools. Waldorf Schools use what is sometimes called portfolio assessment which takes into account all of the students' accomplishments during the year as well as the areas where a student is not doing well so that extra help can be given. Similar approaches are being used in a number of public schools, such as Mission Hill School in Boston where Deborah Meier is principal. Deborah became famous as the N.Y. principal of the Park East Schools in East Harlem. She believes in small schools and integrates the arts strongly into her schools. At her school each student presents his or her work to a committee comprised of teachers, parents and community members. The assessment is challenging for the students but gives them something to strive for and to learn from. It also shows that innovative approaches to assessment are possible in the public schools, and one size does not have to fit all.

For the Alliance this issue has brought us into the halls of Congress for the first time. This has been a great challenge and at the time of writing this article the outcome is not yet known. But even if Congress passes a law requiring more testing for children, the Alliance and others will not drop this issue. Efforts to correct an unjust and unhealthy situation that affects millions of America's children will continue.

For more information on this and other issues one can visit the Alliance's website at www.allianceforchildhood or the site for FairTest, a Cambridge-based organization that focuses on the problems of standardized testing. Their site is www.fairtest.org.

Other Areas of Work

International Conference

In early April I attended a meeting in the Philippines to help plan the second international conference for the Alliance. It will take place in Manila in late 2002 or early 2003 and is being organized by the Lopez Foundation there. Their hope is to bring new insights about child issues into the thinking in the Philippines and throughout Asia through a cross fertilization of east and west. The Lopez Foundation, itself, does excellent work on behalf of children, particularly those suffering from abuse. Their hotline, staffed by social workers, handles over one million calls per year. They have a warm-hearted home for abused children. About 60 were staying there when I visited. A high point of my trip was telling stories to the children. At first they gazed at me with such sorrow in their eyes that I was nearly numbed and could not speak. But as the Shoemaker and the Elves unfolded and the little songs were sung with gestures, their eyes began to twinkle. At the end we stood up and did the shoemaker's circle and all were participating with gusto. Let us never doubt the healing and enlivening effects of even our simplest Waldorf activities.

Commercialism Directed at Children

Another theme that the Alliance has worked on from time to time is that of the growing commercialism directed at children – through the media, via computers, in public schools, etc. Now we are joining hands with individuals and groups stretching from California to N.Y., from Alabama to Maine in order to highlight how big the industry of advertising to children has grown. In September in N.Y. the advertising industry gathers for the Golden Marble awards for the best advertisements aimed at children. The Alliance hopes to take part in the protests and summit that will take place over several days. There are many who feel that enough is enough and that advertisers should not be allowed to aim their messages at children who are too young to guard themselves from them. Under the banner of Stop Advertising to Children, the group will gather to consider the question, have you lost your marbles?

To be placed on the Alliance's mailing list, write to us at P.O. Box 444, College Park, MD 20741.