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## Education Is Not a Race

IN THE UNITED STATES AND ELSEWHERE, THE COMPETITIVE PRESSURES PLACED ON YOUNG PEOPLE in school are damaging many otherwise promising lives. In addition to generating debilitating anxiety and encouraging a culture of cheating, this competition takes the joy out of learning. The film *Race to Nowhere*, which continues to receive attention since its release a year ago, documents the unhealthy consequences of the competitive “teach to the test” climate that many U.S. students experience. The film, in which I was interviewed, puts in clear relief the pressures that youth are under to amass large numbers of Advanced Placement (college-equivalent) classes, win science fairs, excel in the arts and sports, and in other ways distinguish themselves from the competition for admission into a few select universities that parents and schools believe are critical for future success. Research on motivation makes it clear that focusing attention entirely on performance, whether grades or test scores, destroys whatever intrinsic interest the subject matter might have had.\* There are certainly students whose passions spur them to realize their full potential in rigorous academic courses and other impressive activities. But how many potential Nobel Prize winners have written off science before the end of high school because their only exposure to the subject had been in test preparation courses rather than in classes that delved into meaningful questions? It doesn’t have to be this way, but change will require coordinated efforts at many levels.

Success in life does not require a degree from one of 10 universities. We need to evaluate U.S. high schools (pre-college education) on how well they help students find a college that matches their interests and goals, not on the proportion of students that they send to elite institutions. And the coveted universities need to demonstrate that they are interested in students who have a genuine passion for extending their educational experience, not merely in tallying items on resumé.

Many U.S. teachers also must change their approach to teaching. Extensive research shows that students will become more emotionally engaged (and even passionate) if simple principles are followed: if the subject matter is connected to students’ personal lives and interests; if students have opportunities to be actively involved in solving or designing solutions to novel and multidimensional problems, doing experiments, debating the implications of findings, or working collaboratively; if students have multiple opportunities to earn a good grade (by rewriting papers or retaking tests); if attention is drawn to the knowledge and skills that students are developing, not to grades or scores; and if all learning and skill development is celebrated, whatever the level.

Schools must create homework policies to ensure that diligent students aren’t kept up late into the night; schedule some spacing between major tests and offer ample opportunities for students to get extra help; make sure that at least one adult is paying attention to every student’s emotional needs; provide parent education on the advantages of a broad array of potential colleges; survey students regularly on the sources of their stress and make sure that this feedback informs policies; and offer opportunities for students to pursue academic interests unencumbered by performance concerns, such as in independent studies or clubs.

The world is rapidly changing. Problem-solving skills and critical analysis have become infinitely more important than being able to answer the typical questions given on standardized tests. A valuable science of teaching and learning exists that should guide efforts to improve students’ interest, engagement, and intellectual skills, as well as reduce the debilitating stress that is becoming epidemic.\*\* Only by paying attention to what we know can we make the changes that youth need to lead healthy and productive lives.

– Deborah Stipek

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\**Motivation in Education: Theory, Research, and Applications* (Pearson/Merrill Prentice Hall, ed. 3, Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2007). \*\*National Research Council, *Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students’ Motivation to Learn* (National Academies Press, Washington, DC, 2003).

