

How Not to Get Into College: The Preoccupation with Preparation

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By Alfie Kohn

Education is a process of living and not a preparation for future living. John Dewey

In 1981, while I was teaching at an independent school, this journal published my very first article about education. It was an ironic commentary, perhaps a tad short on subtlety, entitled "How to Make the Least of Your College Years," and it consisted of ten rules that had already "helped literally millions of students successfully avoid meaningful learning experiences." Among them:

Let grades control your life. All decisions about how to spend your time and plan your academic schedule should be arrived at with grades in mind. Anything that increases the probability of an A is time well spent; conversely, anything that distracts your attention from boosting a grade is time wasted. . . .

Most important of all, always think in terms of "product." . . . If an activity most likely will not lead to a tangible reward, you're better off without it. Under no circumstances should you allow yourself to enjoy something for its own sake.

These bits of paradoxical advice were intended to satirize something that I continue to write about, more than two decades later. Now, however, the sensibility in question shows up long before students even get to college. Indeed, teenagers are making the least of their high school years in large part because of their desperate attempts to get into college.

There's another respect in which my article might need updating. It seemed to imply that students simply choose to act this way and ought to wise up. In effect, I was blaming the victims rather than looking at the systemic factors that turned them into grade grubbers: pressure from teachers and parents, broader social forces, and the existence of grades themselves. The students' behavior may even be an indirect result of well-meaning articles advising educators how to be more effective at preparing each student to triumph over his or her peers and get into the most selective colleges. Such advice distracts us from the terrible costs of that process, particularly when it eclipses other values and goals. Take a step back from discussions about the relative benefits of SAT I and SAT II, or the effects of early admission, or other aspects of the search for more efficient methods for grooming students' transcripts, and ask the deeper, more subversive question: *What are we doing to our students in the name of college prep?*

A friend of mine who counsels high schoolers in Florida once told me about a client of his who had amazing grades and board scores. It remained only to knock out a dazzling essay on his college applications that would clinch the sale. "Why don't we start with some books that had an impact on you," suggested the counselor. "Tell me about something you've read for pleasure – not for an assignment." A painful silence followed. There were no books to be listed; the very concept of reading for pleasure was unfamiliar to this stellar student.

A number of years ago, I wrote about an experience I had while addressing the entire student body and faculty of one of the country's most elite prep schools. I spoke, by coincidence, during the cruelest week in April, when the seniors were receiving their college acceptances and rejections. I talked to them about the implications of the race they had joined. For many of these teenagers, it was no longer necessary for parents to stand behind them with a carrot or a stick: each had come to internalize this quest and see his or her childhood as one long period of getting ready. They were joining clubs without enthusiasm because they thought membership would look impressive. They were ignoring – or perhaps, by now, even forgetting – what they enjoyed doing. They were asking teachers, "Do we need to know this?" and grudgingly trying to squeeze out another few points on the G.P.A. or the SAT, in the process losing sleep, losing friends, losing perspective. Many of them may have been desperately unhappy, filled with anxiety and self-doubt. Some of them may have had eating disorders, substance abuse problems, even suicidal thoughts. They might have gone into therapy except they had no spare time.*

None of this was a secret to these students, but what few realized was that the process wouldn't end once they finally got to college. This straining toward the future, this poisonous assumption that the value of everything is solely a function of its contribution to something that may come later – it would start all over again in September of their first year away from home. They'd scan the catalogue for college courses that promised easy A's, sign up for new extracurriculars to round out their resumes, and react with gratitude (rather than outrage) when a professor told them exactly what they would have to know for the exam so they could ignore everything else. They'd define themselves as pre-med, pre-law, pre-business – the prefix pre-signifying that nothing they were doing had any intrinsic significance.

Nor would this mode of existence end at college graduation. The horizon never comes any closer. They would have to struggle for the next set of rewards in order to snag the best residencies, the choicest clerkships, the fast-track positions in the corporate world. Then would follow the most prestigious appointments, partnerships, vice-presidencies, and so on, working harder, nose stuck into the future, ever more frantic. . . . until, perhaps, they might wake up one night in a tastefully appointed bedroom to discover that their lives were mostly gone.

And those are just the successful students.

These are the sorts of things I said to this prep school audience, sweating profusely by now and sounding, I began to fear, like a TV evangelist. But I felt I also needed to offer a message for the teachers and any parents who were present. If you know from experience what I'm talking about, I said, then your job is to tell these kids what you know and help them understand the costs of this pursuit – rather than propelling them along faster. They need a cautionary view about what is threatening to take over their lives far more than they need another tip about how to burnish a college application or another reminder about the importance of a test.

When I finally finished speaking, I looked into the audience and saw a well-dressed boy of about 16 signaling me from the balcony. "You're telling us not to just get in a race for the traditional rewards," he said. "But what else is there?"

It takes a lot to render me speechless, but I stood on that stage clutching my microphone for a few moments and just stared. This was probably the most depressing question I have ever been asked. This young man was, I guessed, invariably successful by conventional standards, headed for even greater glories, and there was a large hole where his soul should have been. It was not a question to be answered (although I fumbled my way through a response) so much as an indictment of college prep and the resulting attenuation of values that was far more scathing than any argument I could have offered.

When I conduct a workshop for educators, I like to begin by asking these questions: What are your long-term goals for your students? How would you like them to turn out? What word or phrase best describes what you want them to be like after they've left your school? The answers that come back are strikingly similar, regardless of whether they come from parents or teachers, regardless of whether the students in question are toddlers or teenagers, and regardless of the community's demographics. People usually say they want their kids to end up happy and fulfilled, ethical and decent, successful and productive, independent and self-reliant but also caring and compassionate – and (to continue the alliteration) confident, curious, creative, critical thinkers, and good communicators. Also, someone invariably expresses the hope that students will always keep learning and wanting to learn.

The reason I mention this – and the reason I urge readers to consider (with their colleagues) how they might answer the same question – is that such reflection has the potential to challenge our practices. Never mind thought-provoking; it can be change-provoking. Of course, some people might say their long-term goals begin and end with getting students ready for, and into, high-status colleges; this may well be the *raison d'être* of their school. In such a case, we must concede that the means match the end. But I'm concerned with the far greater number of teachers and schools that say they are committed to other objectives, such as those listed above, but act as if all they cared about was college prep.

With such a tension between goal and practice, something has to give. Inconveniently, there are only two possibilities. Either: the objectives are pushed to the side, regarded as a pleasant-sounding but functionally irrelevant ideal confined to mission statements and P.R. materials. ("It's not really that important to us whether our students are happy, ethical, reflective lifelong learners, but we'll keep that rhetoric in the admissions brochure because it sounds reassuring.") Or: the goals really do matter, in which case the preoccupation with preparation has to be seriously reexamined.

Immediately comes the objection: It's not our fault! Some of our students' parents would have hired fetal tutors if they'd thought that could improve their Appar scores. Some of them have dedicated their lives to preparing their children for Harvard (a process I've come to call "Preparation H"). Some pursue this agenda with the best of intentions, and some are mostly concerned to derive a vicarious sense of triumph from the success of their offspring, to trump their friends when the talk turns to whose kids made good. What are we supposed to do, given pressure from parents who seem to care less about their children's well-being than about their SAT scores and the thickness of the envelopes that arrive senior year from Cambridge, New Haven, and Providence?

Do some people think like this? You bet. Some people also judge individuals by the size of their houses, or nations by the size of their armies. Since when is that a reason for us to do likewise – or to become enablers of their warped values?

What's more, while the faculty blames the parents, there are also plenty of parents blaming the schools with equal passion. ("We try to keep things in perspective for our daughter, but it feels like a losing battle because the school culture is so steeped in grades and scores and admissions.") The only thing teachers and parents can agree on, it seems, is that they are both utterly helpless, caught in the grip of colleges. The colleges, meanwhile – or at least many of their professors – blame the K-12 educational system that deposits eighteen-year-olds in their classrooms whose interest in learning has already evaporated. Fingers are pointed in all directions, understandably in each case, but the upshot is that none of the parties takes responsibility for trying to restore a measure of sanity.

People who work in schools have a responsibility for leading, not only following. Pressure from college admissions offices notwithstanding, educators are not being forced at gunpoint to make college preparation the overriding priority in adolescents' lives. Pressure from families notwithstanding, educators have an opportunity to educate parents, not only children. Of course, we can also learn from them, and we must be respectful of their concerns and beliefs; finding a balance here is an art and sometimes an agony. But part of our job is to help students and parents understand that the difference between acceptance to a moderately elite college and acceptance to an extremely elite college does not justify sacrificing everything (health, happiness, friends, love of learning) in a desperate effort to gain access to the latter.

What happens when college preparation takes over the upper school, squeezing out other purposes? Pre-K-to-12 schools become increasingly traditional as the students get older, with more rating and ranking and a curriculum that is more predefined and less driven by students' interests. But don't adolescents need and deserve student-centered instruction as much as younger children do? And, if so, is it impossible to change what we're doing, or merely difficult? Even those unwilling to question the emphasis on college preparation ought to realize that this goal may not require all that is currently done in its name. Take the SATs. (I resist the temptation to add, "– please!") Those scores often count for less with admissions committees than we think, suggesting an opportunity to rethink the time-consuming, stress-inducing, money-wasting coaching sessions designed to teach tricks for raising scores on a bad test. In fact, about 400 (more than 800 as of 2009) colleges and universities, including Bates, Bowdoin, and Mount Holyoke, have stopped requiring the SAT (or ACT) altogether. (For more information, go to the appropriate page on Fairtest's website.)

What else can we dispense with? As Fieldston and other schools have discovered, students get into terrific colleges without Advanced Placement courses, and that provides an opening for us to think about whether we really need them. The fact that a course is difficult does not mean it is worthwhile. (Indeed, the confusion of harder with better helps to explain an awful lot of what is wrong with the "raise the bar" mindset that currently dominates school reform.) Some courses merely accelerate the worst forms of lecture-driven pedagogy: they have high standards but little room for deep thinking. A.P. courses allow the College Board to determine our curriculum. By virtue of the fact that they are geared to an exam, they are typically more about covering (material) than discovering (ideas).

The list goes on. Schools don't have to give out awards or otherwise create artificial scarcity. Learning doesn't have to be turned into a quest for triumph, and students don't have to be made to regard their peers as rivals. In fact, there's good reason to think that students truly flourish, intellectually and otherwise, in schools that are less (or even entirely non-) competitive, those that feel more like a caring community than like a rat race. Query: What policies in your school might contribute to an adversarial mindset that could be changed without costing a single student a single college acceptance?

Class rank is one answer that comes to mind. True, plenty of admissions committees seem to be looking for winners rather than learners. But relatively few colleges actually insist on this practice. When a survey by the National Association of Secondary School Principals asked 1,100 admissions officers what would happen if a high school stopped computing class rank, only 0.5 percent said the school's applicants would not be considered for admission, and four out of five colleges said it would have absolutely no bearing on students' prospects.

The next step is to look at grades themselves, and especially pressures to raise them, which likewise may be based on false assumptions (see SIDEBAR: "Grade Expectations"). Some schools have eliminated grades entirely – all the way through the upper school – as a critical step to raising intellectual standards, and they have done so without jeopardizing their graduates' chances of getting into selective private colleges or large public universities. To find out what it means to shift the balance of a school from grade-oriented to learning-oriented – and, yes, research does confirm that these tend to pull in opposite directions – speak to the folks at the Poughkeepsie Day School (New York), the Carolina Friends School (North Carolina), the Waring School (Massachusetts), Saint Ann's School (New York), or other schools that offer thoughtful assessments of students' accomplishments without traditional letter or number grades.

The preceding paragraphs make a relatively nonthreatening argument: Even if preparation for college is paramount, it's still possible to phase out some of the most egregious school practices. Students may even be better prepared for college as a result of an education that isn't defined by tests, grades, competition, and the like. But in the final analysis we must concede the possibility that there will occasionally be a trade-off. In some instances, the most efficient way of getting into certain colleges may be to do dubious things, and, conversely, the activities most conducive to intellectual, social, and moral development may not give them an edge with an admissions committee. What then? What matters most? Here we return to the place we began, to a question that defines who we are as educators.

* If this portrait seems too dark or melodramatic, consider that it is now corroborated by empirical research as well as anecdotal evidence. Affluent, suburban teenagers exhibit higher rates of substance abuse and anxiety than their counterparts in the inner city. A brand-new report entitled "Privileged but Pressured? A Study of Affluent Youth," published in the academic journal *Child Development* this past fall [2002], confirms the prevalence of drinking (especially among boys) and depression (especially among girls) among wealthy middle school students. The researchers explicitly link these symptoms to the pressure these kids are already feeling to get into college. Moreover, seventh graders who reported that their parents place a lot of emphasis on academic achievement were considerably more likely (as compared to those whose parents were more concerned about their children's well-being) to show signs of distress and "maladaptive perfectionism."

[SIDEBAR]

Grade Expectations: Examining a Chain of Assumptions

(Adapted from *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Grades and "Prep" Standards*, by Alfie Kohn, Houghton Mifflin, 1991, pp. 288-89.)

To read the available research on grading is to notice three robust findings: students who are given grades, or for whom grades are made particularly salient, tend to (1) display less interest in what they are doing, (2) fare worse on meaningful measures of learning, and (3) avoid more difficult tasks when given the opportunity – as compared with those in a nongraded comparison group. Whether we are concerned about love of learning, quality of thinking, or preference for challenge, students lucky enough to attend schools that do not give letter or number grades fare better. Where grades are still given, students benefit from a concerted effort to make them as invisible as possible. The more they can forget about grades, the better the chances they will be engaged with ideas. (For more details about all this research, see *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, or the article "From Degrading to De-Grading.")

Still, some may fear that students will be unsuccessful in life if they haven't been graded or if those grades aren't impressive. After all, most people – notably admissions officers and employers – care about those marks regardless of how useless or destructive they may be. There is some validity to this concern, but perhaps less than is normally assumed. In fact, the argument rests upon a chain of assumptions that is only as legitimate as its weakest link.

1. Does encouraging students to get good grades make them share that concern? It depends. Heavy-handed techniques, such as public recognition or other rewards for good grades, may lead kids to feel resentful and to try to reclaim a sense of autonomy by staging a quiet rebellion. The harder you press, the more they resist. One study, by Adele Gottfried and her colleagues, found that parents who push their children to get good grades cause them to be less interested in what they're learning, which, in turn, appears to have negative effects on later school achievement.

2. Assume a student comes to share her parents' or teachers' concern about getting good grades. Does that actually produce good grades? Often, but not always. Some stressed-out grade-grubbers end up undercutting their own effectiveness, while some students who are able to take pleasure in learning wind up with good grades that they weren't directly chasing.*

3. Assume a student does get good grades. Does that translate into acceptance by a good college? Below high school, grades are essentially irrelevant to college admission. (Of course, one could argue that making students work for A's at age seven will create a habit that will be firmly in place by age seventeen – and more's the pity if that's true.) But while colleges obviously look at high school grades, that is not the only thing they care about, nor does a high G.P.A. guarantee admission to the most selective institutions. Ivy League schools, for example, typically reject most of the high school valedictorians – and, incidentally, most of the students with perfect or near-perfect SAT scores – who apply. That's worth thinking about in advance: if acceptance to such a college is the sole reason for sacrificing everything else in high school in order to get straight A's, then what happens if it doesn't work? Of course, we're talking here about the most elite colleges, but that fact cuts both ways: at least half of American institutions of higher education accept just about everyone who applies, so again one wonders about the wisdom of devoting one's early years to a costly, nonstop effort to get better grades.

4. Does getting into a good college ensure financial success? While there is undoubtedly a correlation between the two, that doesn't mean the first causes the second. It may be that certain factors associated with one (such as family income) also happen to be associated with the other. If that's true, then admission to the school of one's choice (or one's parent's choice) may be neither necessary nor sufficient for financial well-being. People without the usual credentials, but possessed of determination and a genuine love for what they're doing, often manage quite well in material terms, while people with superlative credentials may be summarily sacked. (Tough economic times make many nervous parents push their kids even harder to get good grades – and, in effect, to see education as little more than a credentialing ritual. But if the conventional approach offers no guarantees, perhaps we should respond instead by questioning basic assumptions about the purpose of school and the role of grades.)

5. Finally, we shouldn't forget to ask whether economic success is the same as, or even positively related to, fulfillment or psychological well-being. The degree to which one spends one's life in pursuit of material gain reflects one's basic values. However, researchers have found that the more people are driven by a desire to be wealthy, the poorer their mental health tends to be on a range of measures. (I reviewed this evidence in "In Pursuit of Affluence, at a High Price," *New York Times*, February 2, 1999.)

In short, the more we're apt to take for granted that it's good to emphasize grades so students will be successful, the more important it is to probe each step in the argument. If there is reason to doubt any of these connections, the ostensible advantage of focusing attention on getting A's – or a school's decision to give grades in the first place – may be outweighed by the demonstrated harms of doing so.

* The study of affluent middle-school students mentioned in the footnote in the main text found that "a disproportionate emphasis on children's achievement, not uncommon in upwardly mobile, suburban communities, not only has the potential to engender distress among children but also has real constraints in terms of the capacity to generate the successes so pervasively exhorted." Specifically, the researchers found that students whose parents especially valued academic achievement were less likely than their peers to score high on teacher ratings of academic competence.

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