

## School is for Winning

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“I don’ wanna go to school!”

How many times was that phrase uttered across America today? And how can we be failing our children to that degree? Children are nothing but curiosity! They are literally programmed for learning. How has the very institution set up to feed that curiosity and facilitate that learning become a place that often engenders icky feelings, scared feelings and sometimes even defeated feelings for our children? Really – what the hell are we doing?

As our nation emerged from colonies to country, educating our young was a local affair, each community raising a building and money to meet local needs. Often, simply being able to read and write qualified one to be a teacher. There were no books about child psychology ... heck, the term *psychology* wasn’t coined until 1879! ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child’ were the watchwords of the day, and children being children was dealt with at school the way it was at home – punitively. The fact that four hundred years later we are employing the same Puritanical values and approach to education in spite of the fact that *we have* read Piaget and Skinner and Bandura is a granite testament to the power of the status quo and the keepers thereof.

We have got to stop telling kids that they failed. No more!  
Education must be about winning.

The standard A through F grading system was devised at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts in 1897. Originally the lowest grade at Mount Holyoke was an ‘E’, however after one year administrators purposely changed the failing grade to ‘F’, and so it has been since. These grades don’t help anyone but college admissions officers and overall they do far more damage than good – especially in elementary school. Considering all we have achieved and learned and undertaken in the last one hundred and twenty years, any system or procedure that was initiated in 1897 and is still in use is certainly worth examining and reevaluating.

We must get beyond the well-intentioned but silly idea that all children should be treated the same and given the same opportunities. It sounds nice, but it serves to limit many children by necessarily including them in classes or activities for which they are truly not qualified or interested, as the classes and/or activities for which they are qualified or interested do not exist. Additionally, and more damaging, it mandates that all children be forced onto the same academic path, the status quo endorsing the notion that it is the only path, where they are measured and ranked in relation to each other.

We don’t *actually* want our children to be treated the same and given the same opportunities – we want our children to be treated as special and unique creatures, with opportunities provided for them to grow into the best them that they can be. It is important to acknowledge that for the majority of our youth, the best them that they can be is not going to include advanced knowledge or understanding of the classidemics - math, science or literature, and THAT’S OK!!!

It is absurd that the word *intelligence* is typically applied exclusively to those with an aptitude for the classidemics. Everyone is intelligent! Everyone has an aptitude for something: art, engines, computer

code, cooking, music, mechanics ... what are you good at? Are you not intelligent? Instead of telling students who do not possess an aptitude for the classidemics that they are not intelligent, let's help them discover the area/topic/subject(s) in which they have an aptitude/intelligence and then nurture that gift.

Of course the curriculum still needs to include readin', writin' and 'rithmetic, as well as geography and computers and music and art! When report card time comes around, there needs to be only one column for each subject, into which teachers will provide a subjective assessment of the student's effort ranging from 0 to 10. Here's why that is better than A through F:

Jordan is someone we would (cruelly) call a 'C Student', meaning she does not have a strong aptitude for the classidemics and her results on standardized tests place her directly in the middle of the curve. She pays attention and does her homework but cannot seem to score higher than a C. If we continually give her report cards with a letter grade C for math, despite her honest and sincere efforts, she may very well get discouraged, think less of herself, be told she is less by others and stop trying. If we continually give her report cards with a ranking of 8 or 9 for effort in math, due to her honest and sincere efforts, she wins and she continues to make efforts. Either way, *she knows no more or less math in the end!*

So instead of trying to force *X amount* of a course curriculum into a student's brain, the goal would be for the student to learn as much of the curriculum as they can effectively process, retain, and use; which in many cases will be more than they would have accomplished by struggling through the entire curriculum. Why not let them have this knowledge and a win, instead of the same knowledge and a feeling of being 'less than' or 'average'?

A lack of effort or caring is one thing, but to tell a young person that tried their best to do something that they are not naturally inclined to do, that they 'failed', is like kicking the dog for not being able to fly. Let's please stop penalizing kids for not doing well in subjects we knew they wouldn't do well in before they cracked the book. At the very least, grade A through E again and ditch the 'F'.

We've got to employ new methods.  
Education can now be effectively personalized.

Things have changed. A lot. They always do. Styles, music, words - all alive and evolving. Fifty years ago, a *popsicle* meant a *Twin Pop*. The Twin Pop was meant to be divided. It had two sticks and an indentation in the center that made it very easy to split it in half - to share.

There was one TV in the house and watching it was a family activity. You shared not only the program, but the time together to laugh and maybe cry and sometimes learn a bit. Most families shared one phone, and some folks shared that on a *party-line* with their neighbors! Young people shared their music via fifteen inch woofers that could be heard around the block, and sharing the old bench car seats could make a night at the submarine races magical. Society was in a sharing mindset. We're not now. We are very much about the individual ... ? except at school.

Today's young people have their *own* phone – a device that is also a personal TV, radio and stereo. Popsicles are a treat for one and bucket seats have aided the love life of no one. We are a 'pay attention to me', 'pay attention to my kid', 'pay attention to my blog' society. This is how today's children are growing up, it is what is normal for them, and the way we try to teach them must adjust to the unstoppable trend.

Learning through the use of video presentations/documentaries, interactive software applications, podcasts of lectures and other resources already at the students' fingertips can all be effective, especially if followed up with discussion, and can free up that teacher to give personal attention where needed. Such autonomous learning also allows students to advance at their pace, not hampered by students with different aptitudes, and enables all students to pursue studies in the area(s) in which they excel/have interest. Available resources make independent and small group projects/learning more feasible than ever, and at an earlier age than ever. The ability to interact with schools and students across the globe presents almost infinite possibilities.

However, none of these modes of learning fit into the classic *shared learning space*, schoolroom model. Will we adapt proactively and give our young people a step up in the world, or will we continue to complain about property taxes and underpay teachers and underfund schools and lag even further behind the rest of the world? Again, what the hell are we doing?

Which brings us back to where we started. So how does any of this make kids want to go to school?

The *social* reasons (kid issues) that might keep children from wanting to go to school can, in the allotted space, be only mentioned, acknowledged and left for another blog. The *academic* reasons (grown-up issues) that might keep children from wanting to go to school will surely be lessened if we do away with A through F, allow and encourage students to nurture their unique intelligence and stop making students wrong when they've tried.

The pressure from parents and teachers and grandparents to "do well in school" is misguided. It is hard to live up to and hard to achieve and is the *wrong measure*. By replacing "Are you doing well (getting good grades) in school?" with "What are you learning?" or "Are you giving it your best effort?" or "How do you feel about your progress?", 16% fewer children will resist going to school.

Remove the pressure from parents to bring home a report card with "all A's and B's" or whatever the household standard is, and another 19% fewer kids want to stay home today. Be proud and happy when your child learns, regardless of how much or little or what grade was given, and 11% fewer children will become anxious when they have to go to school. Enable, empower and encourage students to spend part of their day exploring and learning about things that interest them, and 26% fewer students will feel yukky in their tummy tomorrow morning.

People that win usually enjoy it and want to win again. Students that win in school will want to go to school. Anything is easier said than done, but it really is simple.

Equipped with all we now know about psychology, the history of education in America and its results and about currently available technology, how can we not shake this four-hundred-year-old punitive, pressure-filled, unthinking, often cruel, sometimes demoralizing approach and begin to educate 21<sup>st</sup> century children as though we are living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Are we going to be able to adapt or are we just not as clever as we think we are? Can we find a crowbar big enough to squeak open our wallets and fund schools like responsible citizens who care about our children? Can we be brave enough to decide to make school about children winning?

"C'mon Mom – I don' wanna be late for school." *That's* what we want to hear!