

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is the main message of Race to Nowhere?

Our high-stakes and high-pressure culture has invaded our schools and our children's lives. Childhood has been taken over by test scores, performance and competition. As a result, we have an epidemic of unhealthy, disengaged and unprepared young people. We can't wait for institutional and policy changes to make the changes our kids need today.

Together we can create, support and sustain an educational system that supports ALL kids as whole children, makes health a priority, values childhood and prepares young people for their future.

What do you want this film to achieve?

The film is a vehicle to bring everyone in communities together, to raise awareness, generate dialogue and let people know they are not alone. The film is already creating the political will to transform education; redefine success and achievement; and make the health of young people a national priority. People who see this film will never look at education and childhood the same way again.

What's behind the pressures? How did we get here?

There are a lot of factors coming together to create the perfect storm.

Pressure and fear began in 1983 with the government's report on education titled *Nation at Risk*. It continued with the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2002. And now, with Race to the Top, we feel constant pressure and fear that we won't be able to compete in the global economy.

The media has also contributed to the pressure and fear. The media's focus on numbers, rankings and "most prestigious schools" contributes to the mindset where success is defined very narrowly.

We've traded love of learning for fear of failure, and that's not a good basis for education or for preparing young people for adulthood.

**Who is responsible for the pressures our students face:
Is it parents? Teachers? College admissions offices?
The students themselves?**

No one group is to blame. Everyone is trying to do what he or she thinks is right. The emphasis and focus on standards and testing has left many parents, teachers and students feeling helpless and like they have no voice or choice as it relates to education. We have to move away from “blame” in order to work together towards a vision for change.

**Race to the Top is fueling the emphasis on test scores.
What do you think about Race to the Top?**

Like so many other policies and programs, the intentions are well meant but the implementation has unintended consequences. Our overarching goal in education is to provide equity and opportunity to all. The competitive way that the Race To the Top funds are being distributed defeats this purpose. Race to the Top seems to promote an education system oriented towards high stakes tests, grades, competition, a narrow definition of achievement, punishments and rewards and a one-size-fits-all approach.

**How effective as a measure of performance and
potential are the most common standardized tests?**

Not very. Most standardized tests are multiple-choice tests. These narrowly focused tests are not indicative of student capacity and potential. The tests satisfy the desire for a simple, quantifiable way to measure our schools and students.

Furthermore, when multiple-choice tests are used as the main tool for evaluation and assessment, instruction becomes geared towards these tests rather than teaching for content, engagement and understanding. We need to improve the way we evaluate and consider more authentic ways to assess students.

As Einstein said, “Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.”

**Isn't much of the emphasis on testing also being driven by college admissions requirements?
How do we change if college admissions requirements aren't changing?**

Actually, many college admissions ARE changing because they recognize the limitations of standardized tests.

Please check out Fair Test: The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (<http://www.fairtest.org/>) for a list of over 800 schools where the SAT is optional.

The Education Conservancy (<http://www.educationconservancy.org/>) is another great resource.

But what about those that aren't changing?

Unfortunately change takes time. In addition, people are often resistant to change because of fear.

None of us want to risk our kids' future but we need to all have the courage to value health and resilience over test scores and "name brand" colleges. We need to let colleges know that we as parents support them in looking at prospective students as "whole beings" by de-emphasizing standardized tests and taking the pressure off of students to build a resumé in high school.

There are many paths to a successful future. When it comes to college the focus should be on finding the right fit, not the perfect college. There is a college for every young person who wishes to attend, but we should not be holding up only a handful of "name-brand" schools as the best choices for everyone. Success is not determined by the name of the school one attends.

Parents need to allow their children to make mistakes, to help them learn what they enjoy, and to have a voice and choice in their high school experience.

What are the consequences of today's pressured culture and education system to our youngest children?

We are seeing a number of consequences ranging from increased anxiety in younger children and disengagement with school, to sleep deprivation and a more sedentary lifestyle.

We are also seeing less time devoted to play during the school day. A great deal of learning takes place during play, yet when anything smacks of "fun" it seems to get eliminated. (i.e., art, recess, music, etc.)

As adults we need to remember that play is children's work. By reducing opportunities for play, we are neglecting what researchers, educators and child development experts know about childhood and what is developmentally appropriate for children.

The press continues to report that our test scores are low when compared to other countries. How can you advocate moving away from the focus on test scores if our kids are to fairly compete in the global economy?

The first thing that we need to understand is that so many of these standardized tests do not accurately measure attributes indicative of successful and thriving countries: innovation, creativity, problem-solving and cooperation. Again, two important questions are: 1) How do you define achievement and success? and 2) Do test scores really measure the things that we care about?

The second thing we need to understand is that moving away from test scores does not mean holding teachers and students back from high quality education. In fact, the testing we are currently using limits both teaching and learning. When we focus on testing in school, we produce good test takers. This does not necessarily prepare students for college and the workforce where individuals need to be critical thinkers, problem solvers and good communicators.

Why does the United States currently lag behind other countries in terms of test scores?

It is important to put this question in its proper context. We have often lagged on these tests and yet our country has led the world in creativity and innovation. Test scores are not the only means of measuring human capacity and predicting the future economic success of a country.

If we continue to use test scores to compare our students with other countries we also need to recognize several things: 1) We have a more diverse culture than many other countries; 2) Too many young people in our country are not afforded the resources or opportunities for a quality education; 3) Teaching to the test limits critical thinking skills needed on the international tests; and 4) In the U.S. we test every student, whereas in many other countries, only the top students are tested.

How can we remain competitive when we know our test scores aren't holding up?

First of all, we need to make a decision—do we want to produce good test takers, or independent, healthy, contributing members of society who will lead us into the future?

If we continue to narrowly define success by test scores alone and if we continue to teach using a “one-size-fits-all approach” we will not be helping our students gain the true skills needed to participate in our global society. Such skills as critical thinking, communication, problem solving, creativity, and innovation will continue to get pushed aside.

If we continue to use inexpensive, multiple-choice tests to measure our schools, our teaching will continue to be compartmentalized and depth and understanding will be sacrificed for breadth and regurgitation.

Don't our kids need to learn how to compete since we live in such a competitive world?

True, competition is a part of life. We are not suggesting that all competition is bad or unhealthy. Yet we need to be aware of how much and what type of competition takes place in the classroom and in the activities we allow our children to choose and how that impacts their health and development.

But competition is also a zero sum game. Competition means there are winners and losers, and we can't afford to have any kids be losers when it comes to education. We need to shift our mindset to one where the focus is on cooperation and growth rather than competition and fear.

When we pit one student against another for grades and test scores, we deny them the opportunity to learn to work together. In today's global economy we need new hires to be able to work well together and to function cooperatively as a team. Too much competition in school and society backfires on us later as students become young professionals who are not interested in learning from others or working with others to solve complex problems.

What do other countries do that works?

First, many countries are seeing some of the same issues in young people as we are here in the US. We are getting many requests for international screenings from as far away as Hong Kong, Egypt and Australia.

In Singapore, for example, teachers are valued as professionals, are well compensated and are encouraged to collaborate with colleagues.

In Finland, children don't start school until age 7, there is no expectation that they enter school reading, play is highly emphasized, school performance is tracked but not published and students are not graded until age 13. Finland's students are looked at for their unique talents, there is no advanced placement or tracking of students and the curriculum is focused on the developmental needs of students. Homework is light, private tutoring is rare and the teaching profession is held in high esteem. And this country that puts little stress on competition and testing routinely scores high in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) exams.

**Isn't some stress and pressure a positive force in education?
Rather than relax our standards, perhaps we just need to
teach our kids better study skills and ways to handle stress better?**

Yes, some pressure is healthy. But the kind of pressure we see from an education system that emphasizes test scores and competition is toxic and it isn't working. It's backfiring on us, stifling development and hurting our kids.

Furthermore, a high-stakes testing environment promotes fear within young people preventing them from taking risks and from engaging with learning. Stressed-out, anxious children are unable to learn. Our education system creates students who look for the right answer instead of generating creative thinkers and problem solvers.

Kids need room to be able to make mistakes — mistakes provide important opportunities for growth. Overcoming challenges and making mistakes enhances learning, generates innovation, promotes critical thinkers and fosters resilience and coping skills.

Again, we are not advocating zero accountability or suggesting intellectual rigor isn't important. Yet the experts in the film highlight the need to make education more relevant, hands on and developmentally appropriate. So often kids come to kindergarten filled with creativity and a strong desire to learn, but years of formulaic, uncreative schooling often tends to diminish their love of learning and internal motivation to learn.

Isn't this only a problem in affluent and suburban communities where many parents seem overly focused on having their child attend a very selective college?

The film has been well received in urban as well as suburban communities, and urban audiences have responded with appreciation for the recognition that these issues don't just affect the affluent communities, but all communities. Our schools have become unhealthy environments for most young people. The pressure to teach to the test is being seen in schools in suburban and urban communities.

We are embracing an idea of education reform based on a system that is not working for most students. Even the young people who appear to be succeeding tell us about the brutal toll the pressures are taking on their physical and mental health and employers tell of students who arrive without the skills needed to thrive in the workplace.

In an attempt to address the achievement gap and issues faced in many urban communities, the issue of equity is discussed. This definitely needs to be addressed – but at the same time we have to ask ourselves what do we mean by “equity? Do we really want to use the word equity to mean infusing the same pressures in the urban schools that we have put on the middle-class schools, teachers and students? Why are we holding the way kids are educated in the middle-class and upper-class as the “gold standard?” Yes, equity is needed in teacher quality, equity in funding, equity in opportunities, equity in materials – but not equity in stress and depression and lack of engagement and preparation for college and the workplace. We must also address the economic and social conditions that interfere with children's' readiness to learn in these communities.

Certainly, there are differences in that the kids in less affluent communities don't have the same resources to be involved in as many extra curricular activities as wealthier kids. In the middle class and affluent communities, we need to take a step back and resist the temptation to enroll our kids in too many activities simply because we want them to start building college resumés at such young ages.

Let's transform education for everyone so that ALL young people can be truly successful in life.

What do you think about Advanced Placement classes?

AP classes are supposed to be rigorous courses designed for a small percentage of college bound students who are not challenged enough with their regular coursework. And they were originally offered as a way to earn college credits in high school in order to save costs in college.

Today, we see many students taking these courses in order to receive the GPA boost. Schools are motivated to offer APs and encourage students to take them as the numbers influence the ranking of high schools in the media.

The film does not intend to diminish the achievements and opportunities that many students have by taking AP courses. However, it is important to note that many AP teachers are now focused on getting through a lot of material within a short time frame and testing students, instead of exploring the content of the course deeply. There are so many more authentic ways to bring rigor, opportunity and accountability to a course, to a school and to students rather than giving everyone a false sense of pride that comes in being able to pass an AP test.

Many schools have eliminated AP classes and have replaced them with classes that can go deeper and not constrain students because they have to prepare them for an AP test. When the focus on grade point averages is eliminated, students can take higher level classes in the areas in which they are passionate and excel.

Even if AP classes continue to be offered in high school, steps can be taken to limit the number of AP classes our students take and to close the gap between those who are taking the AP classes and those in the “regular” classes. We are advocating for seeking high expectations of all students and encouraging students to explore the content areas they are passionate about.

Drugs, alcohol and depression have always been issues with US teens. How is that connected to education – isn't it more related to families?

We are seeing the negative impact that our high-pressure, competitive culture is having on our society, schools and youth. The numbers of young people turning to drugs and alcohol has increased. Furthermore, young people today are turning to performance enhancing drugs to just “get through” the system.

What about suicide?

Suicide is a complex issue. We need to examine the relationship between mental illness and unhealthy environments especially on developing bodies.

Rising stress contributes to rising depression rates. Depression places young people at an increased risk of suicide.

We need to be aware that stress, sleep deprivation, lack of exercise and poor nutrition may lead to an increase in many types of mental and physical illness.

As parents, we need to be aware of the pressures our children face and those we place on them. We need to open the lines of communication about the stresses they're facing and offer authentic ways of helping them deal with their physical, mental and emotional problems.

Is it hard for parents to see what is going on?

We need to remember that it might not be easy to see when kids are struggling.

Our kids are trained to look good. We have to be there to listen to our kids and understand that childhood depression may look very different than adult depression.

Parents should look out for psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches; loss of interest in activities; changes in sleeping and eating patterns; and/or signs that their child is easily angered or agitated.

Remember that just as their bodies are going through tremendous changes, their minds and emotions are also navigating the academic and social pressures of school, friends and life.

Offer support, be gentle but also persistent, trust your instincts, listen without lecturing and validate feelings.

How do we begin to address homework?

Research shows that homework isn't correlated with academic success at all in elementary school; that the benefits in middle school cease after the first hour of work; and that in high school, at most one to two hours a night is helpful. Yet in a desire to cover a wide range of content and also as a result of the pressure from many parents, homework loads have in many cases become excessive.

We need to start with the research and look at issues of quantity and quality and what is developmentally appropriate for children and youth at all ages. Everyone needs to be included in the dialogue.

Parents can start by not allowing homework to take over their family life and by resisting the temptation to do the homework or hire tutors to take over. This allows teachers to know what the children are able to handle independently.

In the facilitation guide and on the website you will find information about ways communities can start to address homework.

What are some of the other risks our kids face because of the way we are addressing education and defining achievement and success?

When our kids are doing things for extrinsic reasons like grades, test scores, college admissions or to please one adult or another, we take away their intrinsic motivation to learn.

We need to consider the long-term mental and physical health consequences of the pressures being put on our kids.

Another risk we face with our emphasis on testing is its negative impact on student motivation to learn for pleasure – or even to continue caring about school at all.

What do you think of our kids' schedules?

Simply stated: We are asking our kids to put in too many hours. In many cases, we allow our children, in one day, to be engaged in more hours in school and on homework than would be permitted for work under the labor laws.

Add to that the commitment required of extra-curricular activities, sports and jobs and there is little time left for sleep, family, exercise and socialization.

Should kids spend more time in school?

Not necessarily. First, we need to improve the “quality” of what we do in school and how the time is used.

Should they eliminate extra-curriculars and spend more time on academics?

No, these activities provide different and important opportunities for learning and growth. What we need to do is to advocate for change in sports and extra-curriculars to allow for more balance.

What about charter schools?

There is no simple solution to the problems in our education system today. We need layers of change and it starts with changing the mindset around what makes for a good education. In our film, Dr. Deborah Stipek, Dean of the School of Education at Stanford University, talks about the complexity of reform and the need for a lot of things to happen at once, stating that no one thing, like charter schools, is the answer.

Some charter schools can be a good fit for some students, but some public schools can also be a good fit for some students. The focus should be on the quality of instruction in all settings.

What do you think of teacher's unions?

Many people want to blame the teachers unions for the faults in education. Our film is not about blaming the union. Dr. Deborah Stipek, Dean of the School of Education at Stanford University, talks in our film about how teachers come to the profession and want to do a great job. Rather than a system that punishes and awards teachers based upon standardized test scores, we need to support them and treat them as professionals.

Well, then, who IS to blame?

Our film is not about blaming the teachers, the administrators or the system and seeing the parents and students as victims. While it may be true that students and parents are victims, they are also part of the problem. Students put undo amounts of pressure on themselves to perform. And we parents are partly responsible by pushing our kids to absurd limits in and out of school, by not standing up to organizations when homework or extra-curriculars take over family life, or by not teaching our children that the true meaning of success isn't based on how much money ones makes. We all share the blame. But if we are to move forward, we must stop blaming each other and instead agree to work in partnership to improve the lives and education of children.

Can you tell us what you mean by transforming education?

We need a paradigm shift in education. It starts by changing the mindset around what makes for a good education. Layers of change are needed, and there is no quick fix. Together we can create the political will to move away from current reform efforts to an education system that provides a high quality education for ALL children by putting what works for children front and center.

We need to move away from a one-size-fits-all approach and today's narrow approach to education focused only on testing and accountability.

High quality education starts with attracting and retaining strong educators and leaders in our schools, providing a high-quality relevant curriculum in the arts and sciences, using authentic assessments and creating a learning environment where each child is able to grow, develop and reach his or her full potential.

What is a balanced education for children?

Balanced education is one that takes into account children's developmental needs and one where kids are able to do their learning at school during the 7-8 hours that they are there and where the emphasis is on authentic and relevant learning – not just on grades and test scores. Let's think about how to engage kids, not pressure them. Tired, anxious kids can not learn.

QUICK AND STRAIGHTFORWARD RESPONSES

How do we make changes when state budgets are so strapped?

- Reallocate the resources that are already being directed to education
- Change the philosophy: It's not necessarily "what" we do but rather "how" we do it
- Focus on good teachers and curriculum rather than enriching testing companies
- Make the relationship between teachers and students a priority
- Engage the teacher as "guide on side" rather than the "sage on the stage"
- Reduce the sense that education is a competition
- Focus on educating the whole child
- Focus on depth rather than breadth in learning

What is the vision for education?

The vision is an education system that works well for all children rather than a system they have to fit into. This includes:

- Providing an equitable allocation of resources
- Embracing a mindset that values all children
- Redefining achievement and success
- School communication that values and includes all – parents, students, teachers, communities, public officials, local organizations
- Content rich curriculum with integrated studies
- Providing engaging and relevant learning, i.e., Project based learning
- Putting an emphasis on quality relationships
- Integrating social emotional learning throughout the day
- Valuing and paying teachers as professionals and providing opportunity for professional development
- Supporting student driven curriculum and pace so many levels/learning styles can be accommodated in one class
- Supporting developmentally appropriate curriculum and expectations
- Inclusion and integration of the arts

- Diminishing competition and increasing collaboration for all — staff and students
- Supporting teachers as guides rather than the experts
- Reducing standardized testing and replacing with comprehensive, authentic assessment
- Incorporating vocational and technology training; multiple pathways
- Making homework the exception rather than the rule
- Focusing on depth of learning rather than breadth of materials to be covered

What can be done today?

- Listen to young people
- Give them a voice and choice
- Allow them more room to manage their competing demands
- Encourage them to be present with what they are learning
- Provide them with opportunities to find and explore their passions
- Make the college search about “fit” instead of the “best name”
- Support alternative opportunities after high school graduation
- Form alliances and advocate for change
- Challenge “teaching to the test”
- Rethink accepted homework practices and policies and AP courses
- Get involved by attending meetings, forming alliances, writing policy makers and adding your voice

What can parents do today in addition to above?

- Parents can talk and listen to kids about their experiences and the stresses they are feeling
- We can dialogue with others to see if our experiences are shared
- We can see our kids as more than a grade and a test score
- Make sleep, exercise and family time a priority
- Write your elected officials
- Speak up at school and community meetings

What can educators do?

- Add their voice to the dialogue and help support a movement away from a one-size-fits-all approach
- Individualize education and value the unique talents and interests of all children
- Individualize curriculum and expectations
- Increase opportunities for project based learning and other forms of engagement
- Make learning relevant
- Develop alternative evaluation and assessment tools beyond tests
- Minimize competition in the classroom
- Advocate for developmentally appropriate curriculum that supports innovation, problem-solving and critical thinking instead of teaching that focuses on passing multiple choice tests
- Write your elected officials

What are other schools doing that is working?

Where are the bright spots in education today?

A number of schools that have screened the film have made modifications and changes to their programs to incorporate, emphasize and support the following:

- Student centered education
- Developmentally appropriate curriculum
- Community dialogue
- Project based learning
- Comprehensive assessment
- Teaching for engagement rather than to tests
- Replacing AP classes with classes that are not constricted by an exam
- Homework policies and practices that are in line with the research
- Elimination of tools such as “School Loop” where parents can monitor their students’ grades 24/7
- Recognition of students besides just making the honor roll
- Rethinking how information such as college admissions and test scores are reported to the media

- Starting high school later to allow adolescents the benefits of additional sleep
- Block schedules
- Looping
- Adding study halls
- Limiting the number of honors and AP classes students can take