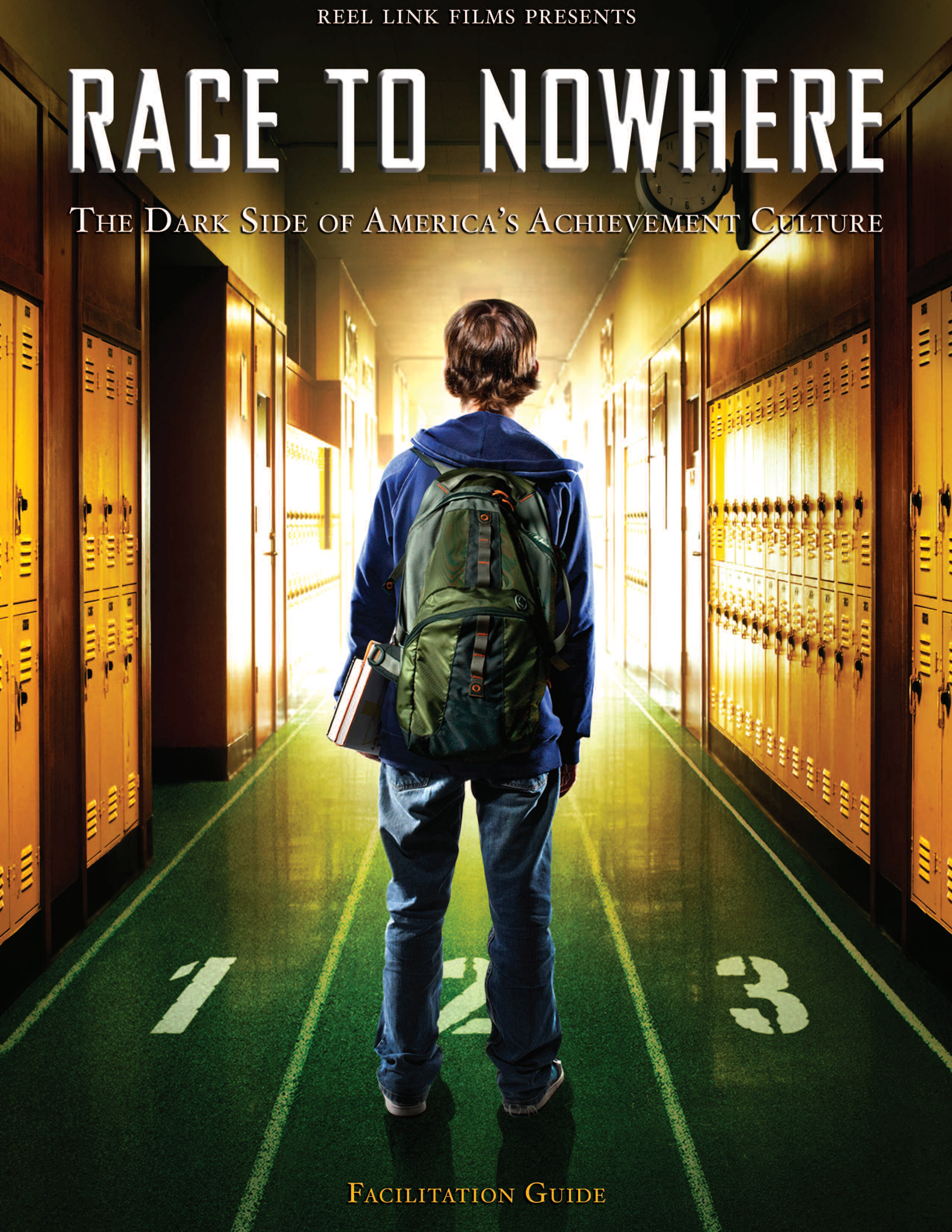


REEL LINK FILMS PRESENTS

# RACE TO NOWHERE

THE DARK SIDE OF AMERICA'S ACHIEVEMENT CULTURE



FACILITATION GUIDE



# RACE TO NOWHERE

A facilitation guide to be used in  
conjunction with the screening of the film  
Written by Kim Westheimer, Vicki Abeles,  
Sara Truebridge, Ed.D.  
Contributing writers:  
Kerry Dickinson, Sara Bennett



REEL LINK FILMS

## A PATH TO COLLEGE, CAREER AND CIVIC SUCCESS

Talents, when revealed, need to be celebrated. Challenges, when discovered, need to be addressed. Problems, when they arise, need to be solved. This is never so true as when we are talking about our children — their health, their growth, their education and their development. It is not enough to alert people to issues and then walk away. It is not enough to uncover problems and then neglect to work through them. It is not enough to lay blame and then move on.

This Facilitation Guide begins the dialogue to address issues and fix problems so that each child, in each school, in each of our communities may be healthy, safe, engaged, supported and challenged. It takes the necessary step beyond merely viewing a provocative film, to engage all adults in collective commitment to raising the children of our communities to their rightful future.

*Race To Nowhere* reveals an issue having widespread effect upon our children's health, growth and learning. In many communities we have reached a saturation point in the amount of work, study, and practice our students can do and the amount of content knowledge they can absorb, understand and make useful to their lives. And in many cases this saturation point is being reached by our children before they enter their teenage years. The film offers a revealing picture and sets the context for next steps. But without further dialogue we face the invidious consequence of either inaction or potentially more damaging, entering a blame game devoid of substance and exit.

It is time for educators, families, students, businesses, service providers, policy makers, and community members to collectively commit to excellence in health, safety, engagement, and learning for each child; time to tell the truth about the toll exacted by overscheduled, over pressured young lives (as dangerous as the more frequently discussed under scheduled, under pressured experiences of others); time to set aside traditional emphasis on winning at all costs to define instead the conditions for learning and development which support long term college, career and civic success. Only through transparent dialogue and meaningful conversation with all parties concerned are we able to truly get at the heart of an issue.

What happens to our children today, affects all of us tomorrow. Our future demands better. Our children deserve better. Please join ASCD, the gifted artists responsible for *Race to Nowhere* and all those who care about the education of children, in dialogue about how to ensure each child, in each of our schools, in each community is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged.

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**“Seeing the stress levels in my children rise and the suicide of a 13-yr-old in my community, I set out to understand what was going on. I learned of an epidemic of stress breaking out amongst kids and a lack of preparation for college and the work place. I set out to understand the state of childhood and education.”** - Vicki Abeles, Filmmaker

**Race to Nowhere** is a documentary film examining the pressures faced by young people, teachers and parents in our high-stakes, high-pressure public and private education system and culture. Featuring the heartbreaking stories of young people across the country who have been pushed to the brink, educators who are burned out and worried that students aren't developing the skills they need, and parents who are trying to do what's best for their kids, **Race to Nowhere** points to the silent epidemic running rampant in our schools. Cheating has become commonplace, students have become disengaged, stress-related illness, depression and burnout abound, and young people arrive at college and the workplace unprepared and uninspired.

**Race to Nowhere** is a call to mobilize families, educators, experts and policy makers to examine current assumptions on how to best prepare the youth of America to become healthy, bright, contributing and leading citizens of today and for the future.

### THE GOAL

Since premiering at the Mill Valley Film Festival in October 2009, **Race to Nowhere** has been shown to thousands of students, parents, educators and concerned citizens. The goal is to use the film as a vehicle to raise awareness, bring communities together to start a dialogue, and to create the political will to transform education, redefine success and achievement for our children, and safeguard their health and well-being. Reel Link Films is inviting school communities, organizations and individuals from across the country to get involved in our effort to bring this film and dialogue to communities nationwide.

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

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Many of us have experienced the frustration of attending meetings where critical issues affecting our children were discussed, yet life for our children remained unchanged the following day. Let's not let this pattern continue. Let's make a commitment to work together towards immediate and productive change.

At Reel Link Films, we are dedicated to supporting you and your community in this effort and have developed this Facilitation Guide as a starting place.

The exercises and resources in the Guide will help you brainstorm what you can do in your homes, classrooms, schools and communities tomorrow, next week and next month.

**We need to work in partnership in our communities to transform education and safeguard the health and well-being of our children.**



*Race to Nowhere* came into being after a series of wake-up calls in my own family made me look closely at the pressures kids face today. I began to question the changes I saw in my children as they navigated days filled with school, homework, tutoring and extracurricular activities.

When my middle-school daughter became physically sick from the stress she was under, I was determined to do something. I started to make changes in my home, but the demands seemed more systemic and beyond my immediate control. I was compelled to do more, so I turned to the power of the media.

I realized the role of the media in contributing to the widespread fear that our education system is failing our students. Furthermore, as policies and reforms in education continued to be discussed and implemented, I began to consider the potential a film could have in giving voice to those most intimate within the educational system yet often last to be heard—students and teachers. I wanted to create a vehicle powerful enough to raise awareness and galvanize ALL stakeholders towards positive, sustainable and systemic change.

My journey of exploration began by attending meetings with knowledgeable experts in the fields of pediatrics, psychology, psychiatry, sports and education. The soaring statistics associated with youth depression, suicide, cheating and drop out rates stunned me. I started to wonder why so many caring adults—parents and grandparents, teachers and administrators, doctors and psychologists, college admissions officers and business leaders—felt powerless to protect our children's health and well-being.

While I knew the pressures facing kids in my own community were great, I wondered whether these issues crossed economic and geographic lines. So I interviewed young people, educators and parents across the country, from public and private schools, from suburbs and inner cities. I learned that kids everywhere, regardless of their background, are under a new kind of cultural pressure to perform, the kind of pressure that impacts physical and emotional health and development.

Our numbers-driven society perpetuates this pressure. High-stakes testing has taken the place of meaningful teaching and learning. College rankings and endowments are also predicated on numbers e.g. inflated GPAs, the ratio of applicants to acceptances and test scores. All of which adds up to an education system focused on competition, performance and rankings.

Today's education often depends on memorization of facts rather than critical thinking skills. As a result, many business leaders and college professors are concerned that the current generation of graduates are uninspired and unprepared for life in a complex global world. We are graduating a generation of young people who have been trained as robo-students unable to think and work independently, creatively and collaboratively. Industry is spending billions re-training these graduates, and colleges are investing resources on remedial classes.

It's difficult to express feelings about being caught in a pressure cooker, especially for adolescents and teens. It takes a lot of courage to tell a personal story of struggle, of overcoming adversity, of giving up because they are overwhelmed by the quantity of work or lack of relevancy of the education they are receiving.

What finally emerged is a close-up look at the unintended consequences of the pressures that permeate American education and culture. Young people are our most valuable resource. They are our future scientists, doctors, lawyers, legislators, teachers, nurses and parents. They will be the stewards of our communities, our nation, and our planet. By forcing developing minds into a one-size-fits-all mold of learning, we are shortchanging the vast diversity and vibrancy of our country.

For too many, childhood has become co-opted by a period of productivity and performance. Children no longer have time to play, to discover passions, to rest, to make mistakes, to reflect, or to build the resilience needed for a balanced and healthy adulthood.

After viewing the film, we hope you will be inspired to take action. Let's make a commitment to work together towards productive and sustainable change. At Reel Link Films, we are dedicated to helping your community find solutions to this flawed system and providing you with the resources to do so. We've developed this Facilitation Guide as a starting place.

The exercises and resources in the Guide will help you brainstorm what you can do in your homes and classrooms tomorrow, next week and next month.

We all need to work together to ensure our children are better prepared for life after high school while making their health and well-being a national priority. We hope schools, parents and communities become partners in supporting our young people and in advocating for change at the policy making level as well.

Sincerely,  
Vicki H. Abeles



## THE REEL LINK FILM TEAM

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Reel Link Founder, Producer & Co-Director: Vicki Abeles

Editor and Co-Director, Jessica Congdon

Composer, Mark Adler

Consulting Director/ Cinematographer: Sophia Constantinou

Writer/Cinematographer: Maimone Attia

Education Consultant: Sara Truebridge, Ed.D.

Facilitation Guide Author: Kim Westheimer

## ADVISORS TO THE FILM

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Sara Bennett, co-author of *The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It* and founder of Stop Homework

Kerry Dickinson, M.A., parent, teacher and founder of the East Bay Homework Blog that examines parenting and education issues

Madeline Levine, Ph.D., clinical psychologist and author of *The Price of Privilege*

Jim Lobbell, M.A., co-founder Teachers' Curriculum Institute and author of several education books

Wendy Mogel, Ph.D., clinical psychologist and author of *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*

Denise Pope, Ph.D, senior lecturer at the Stanford University School of Education and author of *Doing School*

Sara Truebridge, Ed.D., Education Consultant

## PART TWO

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This segment of the guide will help you organize an event centered around the film and build on the momentum of that event to organize for change. The following topics are covered:

- 1 Showing the Film in Your School or Community
- 2 Facilitation Guidelines
- 3 Introducing the Film
- 4 Facilitating a Discussion about the Film
- 5 Suggested Questions for Students
- 6 Follow-up Activities
- 7 Student Activity: Towards Dialogue and Change

### Why show the film?

Whatever your concerns are about youth and schools, there are others who have similar concerns. These commonalities become apparent when people watch the film together in their schools or communities. The film can be a catalyst for change.

### Who should see this film?

Anyone who shares a stake in the future of education, which means everyone! The film is appropriate for parent groups, school faculties, student groups, participants in education conferences, PTAs, health care organizations, universities, business groups, faith-based or interfaith organizations, media/film centers, civic groups and policy makers. The film can raise powerful conversations and lead to action among these groups.

### How much time should I put aside to show the film?

The film is 1 hour and 25 minutes. If you are showing the film in a school or community setting, try to reserve 2 to 2½ hours so you can show the film and have a discussion after the film. This will heighten awareness about the issues in the film and give people a chance to think about what they can do to improve their schools, the lives of children and families, and the state of education in the United States.

### Who should lead a discussion at the film screening?

The discussion can be led by anyone including a parent or someone from a school or a community organization with experience facilitating dialogue. The primary purpose of the facilitator is to establish a safe environment where as many people as possible can be heard from and to empower parents, teachers and students to get involved if they desire change.

### **How can we make connections between the film content and what's happening in our school?**

Consider asking students, parents, alumni and teachers to be part of a panel discussion after the film. Include participants who have a wide-range of experiences so that you can see ways in which your school is similar to those portrayed in the film and ways that your school might be different.

### **Where should I show the film?**

Find a space with a theater projection system that will allow everyone to have a good view of the film. Many schools have theaters with projection systems. If you want to put on a more professional event that attracts a larger audience and press, you may consider doing your screening in a private screening room (at a library, community center, or museum for example) or in a movie theatre. While theatres and screening rooms often have rental fees, your local independent theater may make screening rooms available for little or no cost. Local universities, community centers and libraries might also have spaces available for little cost. Also see if any local organizations host a film series in which it might be possible to include *Race to Nowhere*.

Once you have identified a space, contact our office to schedule the screening.

### **How can I get a good-sized audience?**

Getting the word out is one of the most important things you can do in your event planning. Even a well thought out event with prominent speakers can suffer from low attendance if you don't cover your bases.



Here are some tips for getting the word out:

- Check out our materials and downloadable artwork. Your event is part of a nationwide campaign and we're here to help — so take advantage! Visit [www.racetonowhere.com](http://www.racetonowhere.com) to download customizable event flyers and our press kit.
- Hit the inboxes. The simplest thing you can do to promote your event is to create an email blast and send it out widely via listservs. We suggest you send out two email blasts: one at least two weeks before your event, and another as a reminder several days before. You can also create a Facebook event page and invite all your friends.
- Get it on community calendars. Try to get calendar listings in your city's weekly publication(s) and on the web. Newspaper websites and event sites can help you reach a broader audience. If you have a website of your own, make sure to post information about your event there, and ask any partner organizations to do the same.
- Word of mouth. There is nothing more effective than a personal invitation to an event. Do your best to spread the word by inviting a friend and then asking that friend to invite a friend.

NOTE: Because of the power of word of mouth, we have found that once the film has been shown in a community, there is often a desire to show it again. This is something to take into consideration when planning your event. Consider whether you want to organize one showing or two showings on different days.

As soon as your screening is scheduled, we will include your screening on our calendar on our website.

### What about Media?

Ten days before your event, send a press release to local newspapers. Please visit the website for a form press release. Try to target reporters covering education, children and healthcare issues. Remember to customize your press release to highlight the film's relevance to local issues.

Given that this film is part of a national effort, we have already been conducting outreach to major media outlets, so we ask you to NOT contact major media, and rather focus on local press. If major press or television contacts you directly, please put them in touch with us at [Info@racetonowhere.com](mailto:Info@racetonowhere.com).

### How can I keep people involved in creating change?

Make sure to have a sign-in sheet that circulates at the film (see page 43 for a registration form you can use). Get people's names, phone numbers and email addresses. You can also have boxes for them to check off to indicate whether they are interested in attending more events like this or being part of a group that is working toward promoting the health, wellness and success of our youth by changing school and education policies and practices. Before people leave the showing, announce a date for a follow-up meeting and invite everyone who is at the showing to attend. Following the event, publicize the date for the follow-up meeting to everyone in your community, including those who were unable to attend the initial screening.

Some school communities have created *Race to Nowhere* Facebook groups to allow for follow-up communications and advocacy after the initial meeting.

## FACILITATION GUIDELINES

Before having a discussion about the film, it helps to set some guidelines to frame the discussion. It is important to review these guidelines with the audience BEFORE you show the film. That will allow you to jump right into a discussion of the film after you show it.

Some useful guidelines to present to the audience include:

1. There are bound to be differences of opinions among all of us who are viewing the film. Remember that everyone has one important thing in common: We all care about young people.
2. The content of this film often brings up very emotionally charged issues and you may find the need to do some venting. We will have some time for you to share these initial reactions and ask that you limit the time you speak so that others can share as well.
3. The goal of the film is to foster dialogue and dialogue can only happen when everyone is allowed to respectfully speak. Please listen without interrupting and respect the variety of views and opinions in the room. If during the course of discussion, you see that someone is dominating the discussion, gently remind him or her to let others speak.
4. Please speak from your own experience and don't make assumptions about the motives or experiences of others.
5. There are many people in the room who are already dedicated to helping students be engaged in life-long learning. Let's appreciate their work.
6. Strong schools need involvement from everyone, including parents, administrators, educators and students. Let's appreciate the presence of people from all of the groups who are represented in the room.
7. The dialogue following the film is an opportunity to reflect, respond and ask questions about what you viewed. It is not a time to sell anything so we ask that you honor the request to not solicit products, programs, goods and/or services during this time. (If this does occur you can provide a gentle reminder that this is not the time for soliciting.)

## 2.3

### INTRODUCING THE FILM

The following points can help put the film into context and are useful to use as a way to introduce the film, regardless of the audience:

1. The filmmaker is a parent who was moved to action after a series of wake up calls in her family and community.
2. The filmmaker created the film to raise awareness, create dialogue and empower everyone to take action in their homes, schools and communities.
3. The filmmaker wants to help communities redefine success and achievement for young people, move away from a one-size-fits-all approach to education, create engaged lifelong learners and make students' physical, social and emotional health a national priority.
4. Participants in this film were not given a script. Each spoke from his or her own heart and experiences.

You may want to tell the audience:

1. While watching the film, see what in the film moves you to want to take action. After the film we will provide an opportunity for this group to identify some common concerns and connect with others who want to create change.
2. While watching the film, notice at least one person with whom you can identify or strongly empathize, or find a moment or situation in the film that resonates for you. If you are a parent you might identify with another parent or a student who reminds you of your own child. *(See the next activity for ideas of how to bring the audience back to this after the showing of the film.)*
3. Ask everyone to update their Facebook status to Watching Race to Nowhere in (your city/state). Give the audience a few minutes to do so.



## FACILITATING A DISCUSSION AFTER THE FILM

*Time Needed:* Allow 10 minutes before viewing the film and at least 30 minutes after the film for discussion.

The steps described below will help people find personal connections to the film, begin a dialogue about the issues raised and develop an action plan.

### 1. Create Connections

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After the film, ask participants to turn to someone next to them and share who they identified with or strongly empathized with and why.

Ask for a few volunteers to share with the full group the person with whom they most identified (and why).

### 2. Engage in Dialogue

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As time allows, facilitate a conversation using questions related to concerns of the group, such as:

- a. What ideas do you have for ways to combat student stress?
- b. How are things today similar or different from when you were in school?
- c. Which topics from the film affect you and/or your family?
- d. Have you found ways to help your child manage stress?  
What has been helpful? Would you like more strategies to help your family manage stress?
- e. What are ways that you would like to see the issues raised by the film addressed in your school and/or community?
- f. What are the guiding principles you would like to see for education on the local, state and national levels?

### 3. Move to Action

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Ask the group: Is there anything in the film that makes you want to change anything in your school, home, classroom or community? What can each of us do tonight and tomorrow and what do we want for the long term? Make sure someone is writing down the responses of the audience. This will be important information for future dialogue, meetings and action.

Before concluding the evening encourage participants to attend a follow-up meeting and announce the time and place of that meeting if it has been pre-arranged. If one has not been pre-arranged let them know that someone will be contacting them through the contact information that they provided or through a notice on the *Race To Nowhere* website.

**Hand out a brief evaluation form and action handout and ask people to fill them out. (See pages 40-42 for the evaluation form and handout.)**

## SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

1. What does it mean to be a successful student here?
2. What are your teachers and school doing to help you?
3. What needs to happen to make your school a more caring place? We'd like to hear some specific examples and suggestions.
  4. How do you know when an adult believes in you? What do they say or do?
  5. What would make school more fun, interesting and less stressful for you and your friends?
  6. What would you like to do in school?
7. Have you ever been asked about what you thought of school or education? Who has asked and what have they asked?
8. What kinds of decisions would you like to make in your classrooms, schools and about your education?
9. What do you think is the very best thing about your school?
  10. When you think about how things have changed here in the past school year, what positive changes come to mind? Are there more changes that would help and support you?
  11. What are your dreams, hopes, goals and aspirations? Are there adults who know them? What do you need from the adults in your school, home or community to help you achieve your goals and dreams?

## 2.6

### FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES FOLLOWING A SHOWING OF RACE TO NOWHERE

After you've shown the film and had a lively discussion about how to create schools that are more balanced and student centered, then what? How can you build on the momentum that was generated?

1. **Have administrators, educators and parents conduct student interviews.**
2. **Have follow-up discussions in staff and PTA/PTO meetings.**
3. **Invite parents/guardians, students and faculty to a follow-up discussion night.**  
It could be an open-ended discussion or could be a chance to delve more deeply into some of the activities outlined in the longer facilitation guide.

After showing *Race to Nowhere*, Bishop O'Dowd High School, a Catholic, co-educational, college preparatory high school in Oakland, limited AP and honors classes for the following school year, made plans to educate faculty about student stress and how teacher requirements contribute to it, and encouraged students to enroll in 2 study periods. (Currently 95% take 7 classes with one free period.) "The gift of time helps students gain control of the workload with more study time and also reduces it with one less class," said Steve Phelps, President, Bishop O'Dowd High School.

4. **Develop and implement a survey for students, parents/guardians and staff.**

You may want to have a group of stakeholders develop their own survey as a way of focusing on the priorities of your school and as a way of developing buy-in and communication among different sectors of your school community. While surveys can be broad, you may want to look at a specific areas such as:

- a. Homework
- b. Competition
- c. Testing
- d. Stress
- e. Integration of the arts
- f. Amount of time students spend on school, homework and extracurricular activities
- g. Definitions of success and achievement
- h. Presence of factors that build resilience
- i. Satisfaction with quality of education

5. **Have conversations with staff from nearby schools to see what they are doing to address relevant issues.**



- 6. If your school has student advisory meetings, use these meetings as a place for students to discuss their perspectives on the school environment, stress and their level of engagement with learning.**

This may not reach the young people who need it the most, so consider ways to have all students participate in the process.

- 7. Host a family night so that adults can hear more about student experiences.**

- 8. Host a family night and invite school alumni to come back and talk about their experiences during school and after they graduated.**

Invite a diverse group of alumni so that a broad range of experiences will be expressed. Provide the guests with specific questions ahead of time that address topics such as:

- a. What helped prepare you for your life after high school?
- b. What were the biggest sources of stress for you in high school?
- c. What helped you cope with stress? Were there ways that you coped with stress that were not helpful?
- d. What would have improved your high school experience?
- e. What's an experience you had in school that got you excited about learning?
- f. How important was it to have good teachers and staff?

- 9. As a staff member and/or member of the administration, create a wish list of changes that you think would help diminish student stress and help increase engagement, creativity and learning.**

Include parents/guardians, students and staff in the process. Discuss the benefits and challenges of each of these changes. Pick at least two changes to implement within the next 6 months and develop a plan that is supportive and keeps everyone on track and accountable.

- 10. As a community, determine whether there are changes that can be implemented immediately. Consider the information in Part 3 of this guide as a good starting place for changes that can be implemented in the short term.**

- 11. Create a structure that allows for tracking and managing the change process.**

## 2.7

### STUDENT ACTIVITY: TOWARD DIALOGUE AND CHANGE

**Audience:** Middle or high school students. These activities can work for groups of 10 - 70 students.

**Time:** Depending on the size of the group, allot approximately 30 - 40 minutes for this activity.

**Objectives:** This activity will help students identify and get support for pressing issues in their lives. It is a way for students to see that others share their concerns and can be a jumping off point for action steps to address the themes of the film.

**Preparation for activity:** Have chart paper around the room with the following headings.

- When I watched this film, I identified with:
- I feel the most pressure at school about:
- One thing I appreciate about this school is:
- One thing that could be better about this school is:
- A problem that was raised in the film that is most relevant here is:
- I can relieve stress by:
- One thing the school could do to support me is:
- One thing my parents could do to support me is:

*Note:* With a larger group you may want to have two sets of chart paper so that two groups can be responding to the topics at the same time.

Also have 6-12 markers, depending on the size of the group.

### Activity Instructions

1. After watching the film have students form groups of 6. Ask them to discuss ways in which the film is relevant to their school and their life.
2. After the discussion, point out the chart paper around the room. Provide each group with a marker. Tell them that each group is going to go to one of the chart papers and fill in responses to each sentence stem. They do not need to be unanimous in what they write. Just ask them to reflect all of the experiences of the group. Each group will get 3-5 minutes at each paper and then the groups will

rotate and repeat the process at another chart paper. Each group will add to what the previous group wrote. Ask them to look at the previous responses so that if their response is the same they can just put a check mark by it instead of re-writing it. As the process continues, groups often need less time at each station because they are adding more checks and writing less. You may want to play music while they are at the stations and then stop playing the music when you want them to rotate to the next station.

3. When each group has responded to each question, ask a member of the each group to read aloud the responses that are on the chart paper next to which they are standing. Then ask the students to return to their seats.
4. Ask the full group if anything surprised them about their reaction or the reactions of their peers. Also ask if they noticed any common themes or pressing issues from this conversation.
5. Brainstorm with the group a list of next steps that they want to take as individuals or as a group to address the issues that came up in the film or in their conversations after the film.
6. Establish a date and time for a follow-up meeting to move forward with the next steps they identified.

## PART THREE: HANDOUTS TO DISTRIBUTE AT FILM SHOWINGS

The following handouts represent some hot-button issues. You may want to share some or all of them with the audience at a film screening.

- 1 Tips to Regain Balance for Students, Schools and Families
- 2 Homework: You Can Make a Difference
- 3 Jumping Out of the Rat Race: AP Classes, Rankings, Testing and College Admissions
- 4 Taking Action: A Tool to Create Your Own Action Plan
- 5 Evaluation Form for Film Showings



*“The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.”*  
*-Alice Walker*

In addition to the steps recommended in this guide, there are simple things that we can all do as individuals to achieve some balance, redefine success and advocate for change. Here are a few suggestions:

### Everyone Can

**Add your voice.** Register on the Race to Nowhere website and have your voice counted.

**Attend** school PTA meetings and local board meetings and write to local, state and national policy makers.

**Listen to young people.** Every student wants to be heard, recognized and nurtured as a unique individual. Give students a voice and representation on the PTA and school board.

**Sign** the End the Race to Nowhere petition on the *Race to Nowhere* website or print it and send it to your school administrators, local school board and to the state and national Department of Education.

**Form alliances** and become advocates for change.

**Join us** on Facebook to show strength in numbers desiring change.  
[www.facebook.com/RaceToNowhere](http://www.facebook.com/RaceToNowhere)

**Form** or join a local Race to Nowhere Facebook group to network with other parents, educators, students and concerned citizens advocating for change.

**Question policies** and practices that are driven by media rankings of high schools and colleges or which benefit others financially.

**Advocate** for policies and practices that foster a love of learning in all children.

### What Parents/Guardians Can Do

**Discuss** what success means to your family. Do your family’s actions reflect your values?

**Reduce** performance pressure.

**Avoid** over-scheduling.

**Allow** time for play, family, friends, downtime, reflection and sleep.

**Ask** your children how they are feeling.

**Allow** your children to make mistakes and learn from them.

**Have conversations** with your children about their experiences in school.

**Know** the signs of childhood depression.

**Attend** school board meetings and other venues where education is discussed and policies are established and reinforced.

**Organize** other parents to join you. As a group, talk to your children's teachers, school administrators and attend School Board meetings.

**Discuss** with your child what path he/she may want to pursue after high school.

**Make** the college search about finding the "right fit" rather than finding the "best" college. Finding the "right fit" will ensure college success and retention.

**Allow** your high school children to make independent choices on course selection.

**Follow** your instincts.

## What Students Can Do

**Speak** to the adults in your life about how you are feeling.

**Make sure** you get plenty of **sleep**.

**Unplug**, slow down and reflect on the important things in life.

**Make time** for things you enjoy.

**Limit** AP classes to subjects you enjoy.

**Limit** extra-curricular activities.

**Seek** colleges that use a comprehensive approach to looking at applicants.

**Learn** about the long-term impact of stimulants and performance-enhancing medications.

**Become part** of the film. **Create a video** showing a day in your life or the impact of the pressures you feel. Upload your video on our YouTube channel or contact us for information on where to send it. We will include our favorites on our website and in the DVD extras.

**Create alliances** with students at your school who desire a mindset that values the individuality of every student and moves away from a one-size-fits-all approach to education. Seek the support of one or more faculty members.

**Participate** with students in other states advocating for change in education. See our Facebook page and website for details.

**Request** student representation on the PTA and school board. Make sure to have a diverse group of students represented.

## What Educators Can Do

**Become** knowledgeable about **research** in the area of homework and the importance of play and downtime.

**Observe** what happens when you assign less **homework**.

**Document** what happens when you **stop grading** homework.

**Empower students** with more voice and choice in the classroom.

**Find opportunities** to evaluate students without tests.

**Advocate** for alternatives to standardized testing.

**Teach** to your passions and develop projects that are student driven and engage them in learning.

**Share your voice** on policies impacting education in your school community and at school board meetings.

**Develop** a plan of action to create a positive and healthy educational environment that supports the whole child and recognizes the unique talents of every individual.

**Consider** the way your school recognizes students and include opportunities for a broad range of young people to be recognized.

## What Administrators Can Do

**Develop** a plan of action to create a positive and healthy educational environment that supports the whole child. Remember learning should always be joyful and enhance life.

**Advocate for students.** Listen to their needs and react accordingly. Be inclusive and address the diverse needs of your students.

**Support** "multiple pathways" in school integrating academics with career and technical education.

**Consider** a later start time for the school day in high school.

**Address** sources of stress for children, educators and families.

**Set expectations** with faculty at the beginning of the year: e.g., if homework takes longer than a set amount of time, the student should not continue to the point of frustration and should not suffer any consequences at school.

**Make** sure that elementary school students have recess and older students have time for lunch.

**Create** a homework task force to adopt policies and practices that are based on the research. Assign someone to ensure policies are followed.

**Consider** making homework the exception rather than the rule.

**Consider** the way your school recognizes students and include opportunities for a broad range of young people to be recognized.

**Consider** how your school shares information with the media around test scores and college admissions and the unspoken message to students when this information is shared with the media.

**Consider** block schedules to reduce the number of transitions and contacts for students and teachers.

**Re-think AP** programs. Work closely with college admissions offices to share how your students are evaluated.

**Ensure** that school websites are focused on school communications rather than grades.

**Create** calendars to reduce overlapping demands and establish guidelines for tests and projects immediately prior to or after holiday breaks.

**Provide** opportunities for open communication between teachers, parents and students.

**Create a vision for change** with the emphasis being on engaged learning and supporting the whole child rather than teaching to a test.

## What Coaches Can Do

**Check** out the positive coaching alliance at <http://www.positivecoach.org/>

**Become** aware of demands on your athletes from academics, other activities and sports.

**Become** aware of what is developmentally appropriate — physically, socially, cognitively and emotionally — for the age group you are working with.

**Become** aware of your athletes' academic load.

**Consider flexibility** around missed practices where young people and their families are navigating multiple demands.

**Work** with school administrators and other schools in your leagues to encourage limitations on the number of hours each week for practice and games.

**Create** opportunities for open communication between coaches, teachers, parents, students and the administrators in your school or district.

### What Medical Professionals Can Do

**Recognize** the signs of youth stress: headaches, stomachaches, dizziness, chest pain and change in appetite and sleeping patterns.

**Educate** parents on the signs of depression in adolescents.

**Educate** young people on the medical implications of the use of stimulants and performance enhancing medications.

**Educate** parents, coaches and young people on the risk of over-use injuries.

**Educate** everyone on the importance of schools maintaining physical education classes and recess and the dangers of too much sedentary time spent at a desk or computer.

*“People [ask], ‘Doesn’t doing more homework mean getting better scores?’ The answer quite simply is no.”*

Professor Gerald LeTendre at Pennsylvania State University and co-author of *National Differences, Global Similarities: World Culture and the Future of Schooling*

### Increases in amount of homework

A study that looked at the amount of homework assigned between 1981 to 1997 found that:

- the amount of homework assigned to kids from 6 to 9 almost tripled during that time,
- assigned homework increased from about 44 minutes a week to more than 2 hours a week, and
- homework for kids aged 9 to 11 increased from about 2 hours and 50 minutes to more than 3½ hours per week.<sup>1</sup>

### More homework does not equal increased learning

A 2006 synthesis of research on the effects of homework found no correlation between amount of time spent on homework and achievement for elementary school students, and only a moderate correlation in middle school. In middle school, this moderate correlation was shown to decrease once the homework time exceeded one hour. Even in high school, too much homework was found to be counterproductive.<sup>2</sup>

A cross-cultural analysis of education practices found that American middle-school students do more homework than their peers in Japan, Korea and Taiwan. The study found that more homework does not correlate with higher test scores.<sup>3</sup> For example, middle school students who scored highest in math tests tended to come from countries where teachers assign relatively little homework — including Denmark, the Czech Republic and Japan. The lowest-scoring students came from countries where teachers assign large amounts of homework, such as Iran, Thailand and Greece.<sup>4</sup>

## Quality versus quantity

Some educators suggest that students should be assigned ten minutes per grade level per school night (Monday through Thursday only) up to a maximum of two hours per night in high school. Others have rejected this guideline because it has not been shown to improve measures of higher thinking skills.

## Negative effects of too much homework

- **Boredom:** Any activity can remain rewarding only for a limited time. It follows that if students are required to spend too much time on academic material, they eventually will become bored with it.
- **Loss of Downtime:** Homework limits the time students can spend on leisure-time and community activities that can impart important lessons, both academic and non-academic.
- **Homework Done by Parents:** Parental involvement, however well meant, often becomes parental interference. Parents can confuse children if the teaching methods they employ differ from those of teachers.
- **Cheating:** Homework can lead to undesirable behaviors such as cheating, either through copying of assignments or receiving assistance with homework that involves more than tutoring.
- **Exacerbation of Social Inequalities.** Students from lower-socioeconomic homes are likely to have more difficulty completing homework than their more well-to-do peers. Poorer students are also more apt to work after school or may not have a quiet place to do assignments.<sup>5</sup>

Other consequences of excessive homework include:

**Sleep deprivation.** Excessive homework forces students to choose between completing assignments and sleep. 80% of teens don't get the recommended 9.25 hours of sleep each night. 70% of kids ages 5-12 don't get the recommended 10-11 hours of sleep.<sup>6</sup>

**Stress.** 9-13 year olds said they were more stressed by academics than any other stressor — even bullying or family problems.<sup>7</sup>

**Sedentary Lifestyle.** When children spend 2-5 hours per night completing homework assignments, they have little time left for physical activities. This can have a negative impact on physical and mental health.



## If homework isn't helpful, what is?

**Family meals.** According to a study conducted by Columbia University, when compared to teens who have five to seven family dinners per week, those who have fewer than three meals per week are one and a half times more likely to report getting mostly C's or lower grades in school.<sup>8</sup>

**Reading.** Several studies suggest reading for pleasure is a better predictor of test scores than quantity of homework yet a 2006 Scholastic/Yankelovich study found that reading for pleasure declines sharply after age eight. The number one reason: too much homework.<sup>9</sup>

**Schools can eliminate or reduce homework.** The following schools are among those that have eliminated homework or limited homework to after-school reading: *\*Refer to our website for more schools that have addressed issues of homework.*

- Bloomfield Middle School, Bloomfield, MO
- Grant Elementary School, Glenrock, WY
- Helendale Elementary and Middle Schools, Helendale, CA
- VanDamm Academy K-8, Aliso Viejo, CA
- Nottingham East Academy, Nottingham, UK
- Oak Knoll Elementary School, Menlo Park, CA
- Tiffin Boys' School in Kingston, London, UK

## ACTION STEPS FOR PARENTS, EDUCATORS, ADMINISTRATORS AND STUDENTS

Create a committee of parents, educators, administrators and students to review and modify your school or district's homework practices and policies. Ask the committee to review relevant research and consider the following steps:

- Limit homework to two hours per night in high school and one hour per night in middle school.
- Assign no homework in elementary school.
- End homework assignments on weekends, vacations and over the summer.
- Build in study hall periods for students to work on academic assignments.

- Survey parents, educators, administrators and students for their perspectives on the impact and efficacy of homework.
- Stop grading the homework.
- Assign homework that cannot be cheated on (creatively designed work that is specific to individual needs).
  - Eliminate punitive consequences for uncompleted homework across grade levels.
  - Assign homework that doesn't require parental or adult help.
  - Allow families to opt out of homework.
  - Have occasional community nights during the week where no homework is assigned.
  - Assign specific weeknights for specific subjects.
- Have a designated person in the school who monitors whether homework policies are being followed.
- Make homework the exception rather than the rule. Consider longer term projects that allow for choice, develop a student's interests, are relevant to a student's life and lead to a longer lasting sense of understanding.
- Allow students to self-assign homework. When they are excited by what they are learning, they will be self-motivated to learn more outside of the classroom.
- Before leaving a screening, agree to create a committee of parents, teachers, administrators and students to form a homework task force.

#### Other action items for parents:

If you are unhappy with the quality and quantity of homework your child is being assigned, set up a meeting with your child's teacher or express your concerns in a letter to the teacher.

Don't let homework interfere with sleep, dinner, reading and physical activities.

Don't make grades, homework and test scores a singular focus in discussions about school with your children.

Form alliances with other parents who share your concerns and meet with teachers and administrators together.

### For more ideas and resources

<http://www.stophomework.com>

Stop Homework is the blog of Sara Bennett, co-author of *The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It*. Stop Homework provides homework news, opinion articles and guest editorials.

<http://eastbayhomework.blogspot.com/>

East Bay Homework is a blog started by Kerry Dickinson, a parent who sees homework as a good launching point for thoughtful discussions about issues like: parenting, ADHD, standardized testing, teacher training, preserving childhood, curriculum, colleges and student stress.

<http://www.alfiekohn.org>

AlfieKohn.org is the website for Alfie Kohn who writes and speaks widely on human behavior, education, and parenting. His latest book is *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing* (2006).

### JUMPING OUT OF THE RAT RACE: AP CLASSES, RANKINGS, TESTING AND COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

*Once you become active in something, something happens to you. You get excited and suddenly you realize you count.*

– Studs Terkel

A major goal of *Race to Nowhere* is to stimulate dialogue and motivate change within individual schools and districts as well as at the state and federal level. Change is being made in many schools through a grassroots movement that includes parents, students, educators and administrators. These people are challenging the way students are educated in this country and we can learn and be inspired by them.

#### ABOLISHING ADVANCED PLACEMENT (AP) CLASSES

Below are some public and private schools that have responded to research showing minimal benefits from AP classes. The research in the area includes:

A survey of 8,594 college students taking introductory science courses found that students who took and passed an AP science exam did only about one-third of a letter grade better than their classmates with similar backgrounds who did not take an AP course.

A survey of 18,000 college students enrolled in introductory biology, chemistry and physics found little evidence that high school AP courses significantly boost college performance in the sciences.

A *USA Today* analysis found that the number of students taking AP tests hit a record high last year, but the percentage of students who fail the exams is rising as well. In 2009, 41.5% of students who took AP tests in the USA received a failing score.<sup>11</sup>

#### Chestnut Hill, MA

The independent school, Beaver Country Day School, eliminated College Board AP courses in 2006. Instead of advanced AP courses that were shallow surveys that concentrated on breadth instead of depth, the school wanted more focused courses on engaging themes. As a result, they developed advanced courses on

topics such as Exploring the Roots of Islamic Extremism; Complex Systems Modeling; Cryptology and Monsters; and Degenerates, a study of dark figures in the novels of Conrad, Wilde, Woolf, and others. Beaver's Advanced Biology is divided into three one-term segments: DNA and Genetic Science, Ecology and Field Studies, and Anatomy and Physiology.<sup>12</sup>

### Bronx, NY

The Ethical Culture Fieldston School, an independent school, eliminated AP classes in 2001, three years after a student, Matthew Spigelman, wrote a paper for his English class arguing that the school should drop AP. "While the goal of AP courses is to prepare students for the AP test, the goal of Fieldston-specific courses is to learn for learning's sake. Courses specific to Fieldston have curricula generated by Fieldston teachers. Thus, Fieldston teachers bring enthusiasm to the Fieldston-generated courses not generally found in AP courses." Spigelman also commented on the paradox of offering fact-based survey courses as the capstone of the curriculum. "It is ironic," he wrote, "that the top students, who will be trying to take the most specialized courses available in college, are taking the most general courses available in high school largely because the course titles are preceded by the letters 'AP.' " <sup>13</sup>

The first class to graduate in three decades without taking one AP class, heard back from colleges about early admission decisions. At least 40 were admitted through early decision to their first-choice schools, and about a dozen were admitted through early action selections that are nonbinding for the students. The totals constituted the highest early acceptance rate for the school in several years, said Rachel Friis Stettler, the principal of its high school.<sup>14</sup>

### Scarsdale, NY

The public high school in Scarsdale turned its back on school rankings in the media and abolished AP classes to free teachers from having to teach to the test. The school has replaced AP classes with an Advanced Topics curriculum that allows students to study topics more in depth including string theory, advanced government and art.

An English teacher who taught AP English for six years welcomed the change, saying that he previously felt as if he was cheating his students when he strayed from the regimen of test preparation. "The teaching can be more indirect now and, I think, richer and deeper," he said. "Our responsibility is to prepare students as well as we can, but we're not going to the scores to see whether it's working."

### Westtown, PA

The Westtown Schools is a Quaker, co-educational, day and boarding school for grades Pre-K - 12. When the school dropped AP classes, Tim Loose, who taught AP Biology for over 20 years and also served as a reader of AP exams reinvented his teaching. “The biggest benefit is pace,” said Loose, “I don’t have to lay out my whole syllabus at the beginning.” Loose now plans his course in two-week intervals in order to be more responsive to students’ interests.

Rather than offer a single advanced Biology course, Westtown now teaches two: Research Ecology: Pieces, Patterns, and Processes; and Evolutionary History of Life on Earth. Each course offers ample opportunity to examine big-picture themes. Such possibilities are most obvious in Evolutionary History of Life on Earth. While typical biology courses merely describe the characteristics of organisms, this one allows students to see relationships between them as part of evolutionary development. It also opens the door to meaty big-picture issues about the meaning of it all.<sup>15</sup>

### RETHINKING RANKINGS

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Every year *Newsweek* magazine ranks the “best high schools” in the US based solely on the percentage of students taking AP or International Baccalaureate Tests. In 2007, the Palo Alto School District in California said that it would not play this game. In declining to participate in *Newsweek* magazine’s annual ranking of high schools, Palo Alto says it hoped to strike a blow against shallowness, student stress and unwanted publicity. Other schools have declined to answer the survey, which ranks the top 1,200 or so high schools in the nation. But this may be the first time an entire district has dropped out.<sup>16</sup>

This move came two years after Palo Alto High School students took a survey about student stress. According to the survey, completed by 1,450 students online, most students said large amounts of homework — up to five hours a night — cause them the most stress. Students also stated that parents — as well as themselves — dole out the excessive pressure to achieve high grades and get into top colleges. Adding to their homework frustrations, students said their teachers rarely indicate how much time assignments should take, nor do they check in to see how long the projects actually took.<sup>17</sup>

## STANDARDIZED TESTING

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*The push for standardized testing has an impact on schools and children as early as Kindergarten. The National Association for the Education of Young Children, a professional organization of educators and administrators, has long counseled a measure of sanity in contrast to over-testing of children. The organization has a position statement that decries the impact of public demand for stringent educational standards as early as kindergarten and which give classroom teachers little or no part in decisions which determine curriculum and instructional methodology.<sup>18</sup>*

Standardized testing has been at the core of No Child Left Behind, yet there is no research that shows that such testing actually helps students learn. The inordinate amount of time spent teaching to the test has actually been shown to have some negative effects. In addition, it can cause students to disengage.

A study by researchers at Rice University and the University of Texas-Austin found that Texas' public school accountability system, the model for the national No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), directly contributed to lower graduation rates. Particularly disturbing, were findings that schools' ratings increased in part because low-achieving students dropped out at increased rates.<sup>19</sup>

The Coalition for Better Education is fighting against standardized testing in Colorado and encouraging parents to refuse to have their children take standardized tests by submitting an "opt-out" letter to their child's school and/or district. For more information and a sample opt-out letter go to [www.thebbe.org](http://www.thebbe.org).

A clearinghouse of information for parents and educators interested in stopping over-reliance on standardized testing can be found at: <http://www.susanohanian.org>. The website also includes numerous action and advocacy strategies.

Diane Ravitch, Assistant Secretary of Education under President George H.W. Bush, led the federal effort to promote the creation of state and national academic standards. In a stunning turn-around, Ravitch publicly reversed many of her previous positions with respect to accountability and choice. With reference to standardized testing, she wrote in an op-ed piece in the Washington Post, "We need assessments that gauge students' understanding and require them to demonstrate what they know, not tests that allow students to rely solely on guessing and picking one among four canned answers." We wasted eight years with the "measure and punish" strategy of NCLB. Let's not waste the next eight years.<sup>20</sup>



## COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

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The college search should be about finding the right fit rather than the most prestigious college. There are many resources to help students do this. They include:

**Colleges That Change Lives, Inc.** (<http://www.ctcl.org/>) Colleges that change lives (CTCL) is dedicated to the advancement and support of a student-centered college search process. Their mission is to support the goal of each student finding a college that develops a lifelong love of learning and provides the foundation for a successful and fulfilling life beyond college. The director of CTCL, Marty O'Connell, challenges students to:

**think about the people in their lives who are happy and successful and find out where, or if, they went to college. Doing this same exercise using "famous" people, they discover that most often the name and visibility of a college choice has much less to do with success in life than do the experience and opportunities students take advantage of during their college years.**  
<http://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/07/28/lessvisible/>

**Education Conservancy** (<http://www.educationconservancy.org/>) The Education Conservancy (EC) is committed to improving college admission processes for students, colleges and high schools. By harnessing the research, ideas, leadership and imagination of thoughtful educators, EC delivers appropriate advice, advocacy and services.

**FairTest** (<http://www.fairtest.org/>) FairTest works to end the misuses and flaws of standardized testing and to ensure that evaluation of students, teachers and schools is fair, open, valid and educationally beneficial. This organization lists colleges where the SAT is optional or accorded less weight in the admissions process.

**The National Survey of Student Engagement** (<http://nsse.iub.edu/>) The National Survey of Student Engagement gathers data about colleges and universities beyond the usual rankings. The organization examines student engagement, how students spend their time and what students perceive they gain from attending college.

Consider the topics raised by *Race to Nowhere* and develop your own action plan.

1. Activities I want to accomplish are...

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2. During the next two weeks I will...

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3. During the next month I will...

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4. During the next year I will...

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5. I need resources and support to...

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6. A question I still have is...

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## RACE TO NOWHERE: TELL US WHAT YOU THINK

Thank you for participating in today's event. Please take a few moments to complete this simple survey.

All information you provide is anonymous and confidential.  
Thank you!

**1. Would you say that today's event was:**

☐ Excellent    ☐ Good    ☐ Fair    ☐ Poor

**2. Which topics concern you?**

	Yes	No	Not Applicable
Homework			
Student stress			
Depth of teaching (versus teaching to tests)			
Emphasis on standardized testing			
Lack of family time			
Students not having enough down time			
Pressure for college prep and applications			

**3. Would you be interested in attending any of the following programs (check all that apply):**

- ☐ An organizing meeting with other people who have concerns similar to my own
- ☐ An event where adults can listen to the experiences and concerns of students
- ☐ An event where school alumni reflect on their experiences in this school district

**3. Which of the following best describes you? (Check all that apply)**

- ☐ Educator    ☐ Administrator    ☐ Parent    ☐ Student
- ☐ Concerned Adult    ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**4. Why did you attend today's event?**

5. What are some changes you would like to see in your school, community or family as a result of today's event?

6. If you are a parent, in which grade(s) are your children? (Check all that apply)

- |                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pre-K        | <input type="checkbox"/> 7th                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Kindergarten | <input type="checkbox"/> 8th                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1st          | <input type="checkbox"/> 9th                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2nd          | <input type="checkbox"/> 10th                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3rd          | <input type="checkbox"/> 11th                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4th          | <input type="checkbox"/> 12th                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5th          | <input type="checkbox"/> College, working, other |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 6th          |  |

If you are interested in being contacted for further activities please give us your contact information:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for coming to today's event.

Please feel free to use this in your school community for further action, or to submit to *Race to Nowhere* via email or fax (925) 310-4239.

Please check the box indicating permission for use of your quotes on our website.

☐

### 3.6

#### FOLLOW-UP MEETING

A meeting to continue the dialogue started tonight:

\_\_\_\_\_ has been scheduled for \_\_\_\_\_ or  
\_\_\_\_\_ will be scheduled soon.

Please provide your contact information below if you would like to participate.

NAME	TELEPHONE	EMAIL
NAME	TELEPHONE	EMAIL
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NAME	TELEPHONE	EMAIL

### FOOTNOTES: PART THREE

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## PART FOUR

### 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.

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

There are a number 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.

#### Who is responsible for the pressures our students face:

Is it parents? Teachers? College admissions offices?

The students themselves?

Our film is not about blaming. Everyone is trying to do what he or she thinks is right. 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.

**Race to the Top is fueling the emphasis on test scores.**

**What do you think about Race to the Top?**

Our overarching goal in education is to provide equity and opportunity to all. Like so many other policies and programs, the intentions are well meant but the implementation has unintended consequences. Race to the Top seems to promote an education system oriented towards high-stakes tests, 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, teachers and students. We need to improve the way we evaluate and consider more authentic ways to assess students.

Furthermore, when multiple-choice tests are used as the main tool for evaluation and assessment, education focuses on “teaching to a test” rather than teaching for content, engagement and understanding.

**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?**

Change takes time and courage. We can approach this challenge from many angles.

First, as parents, none of us want to risk our kids' future yet we need to value the health and resilience of our children over the stress and pressures driven by high-stakes testing, inflated GPAs and the focus on building resumes in high school. We also must remember that there are many paths to a successful future – success is not determined by the name of the school one attends. And ultimately when it comes to college, the focus should be on finding the right fit, not a “name brand” college.

Second, teachers, administrators, parents and students in a school district or community can come together and identify what their true goal and purpose is at all levels of schooling – elementary, intermediate and high school – is it to prepare students solely for the college application or for the college experience and beyond?

Third, college and university trustees, admissions offices, professors, donors and alumni can speak out regarding admission policies and practices.

### **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.

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?**

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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 a 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?**

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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 memorization.

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

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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.

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?**

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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, South America, Europe and Australia.

A country that is often cited for its success in education is Finland, where children don't start school until age 7 and 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.

### **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?**

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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 compromising the health of 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 suburban 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.

Our culture is 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. We must also address the economic and social conditions that

interfere with children's' readiness to learn in these communities. But at the same time we have to ask ourselves what do we mean by "equity?" 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. Schools must be made into safe sites of opportunity where community members are invited in to support our youth.

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?

The film does not intend to diminish the achievements and opportunities that many students have by taking AP courses. However, today we see many students taking these courses in order to receive the GPA boost. Furthermore, schools are motivated to offer APs and encourage students to take them as the numbers influence the ranking of high schools in the media.

It is important to note that the focus of many AP classes is 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.

A number of 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?**

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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?**

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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?**

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

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 be persistent, trust your instincts, listen without lecturing and validate feelings.



### **How do we begin to address homework?**

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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 do you think of our kids' schedules?**

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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?**

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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?**

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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. In our urban communities we need to provide more opportunities to engage in these activities.

### What about charter schools?

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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.

### What do you think of teacher's unions?

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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. In the often cited Finnish education system, teachers are unionized.

### Can you tell us what you mean by transforming education?

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Reform means building on things that exist. Transformation involves creating something new. A paradigm shift is needed. It requires changing the mindset for how we define educational success and for how we determine what makes for a good education.

Layers of change are needed. It starts with a commitment to equity in resources and opportunities for ALL.

Each community has to be recognized for its own unique strengths and challenges. No longer can we have a one-size-fits-all solution. Only with a lens focused on “education transformation” can we authentically engage in a dialogue on how best to define and assess educational success and achievement in a manner that promotes a positive and sustainable educational climate conducive to the health and well being of all students and to our society at large.

## QUICK AND STRAIGHTFORWARD RESPONSES

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

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- 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?

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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
- Promoting school communication that values and includes all – parents, students, teachers, communities, public officials, local organizations
- Offering content rich curriculum with integrated studies
- Providing engaging and relevant learning, i.e., Project based learning
- Putting an emphasis on quality relationships
- Integrating social and 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

- Including and integrating the arts
- Diminishing competition and increasing collaboration for all — staff and students
- 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?

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- 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...

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- Talk and listen to kids about their experiences and the stresses they are feeling
- Dialogue with others to see if experiences are shared
- See 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? Educators can...

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- 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
- Increase opportunities for project based learning and other forms of engagement
- Make learning relevant
- Develop alternative evaluation and assessment tools beyond multiple-choice 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
- Speak up at school and community meetings

### What are other schools doing that is working?

### Where are the bright spots in education today?

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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
- Implementing block schedules
- Looping
- Adding study halls
- Limiting the number of honors and AP classes students can take

**Our longer Facilitation Guide features specific examples of innovative schools.**