

No Child Left Alone

Tuesday, December 18, 2007



There's good reason this country is wringing its hands over our education system. But what happens when society's anxiety begins to engulf our children?

By Bruce Kluger



By Web Bryant, USA TODAY

I almost lost it — and in a seventh-grade classroom, no less.

It was "curriculum night" at my daughter's middle school, and all the parents were stuffed into small chairs, listening to a parade of teachers describe what was expected of our kids this year. My 12-year-old, Bridgette, had been complaining about her heavy workload, and now I was seeing firsthand just how daunting her schedule was. It put me on edge for her.

Then the guidance counselor stood up. "Seventh grade is a crucial time for the children," she said soberly, explaining in detail how our kids' academic performance this year could dramatically affect their educational path. "So we stress to the kids that this is when their grades really start to matter."

That's when I felt the blood rush to my face. "Wait a minute," I interrupted. "Are you actually telling this to our kids?" I shot a glance at my wife to see whether she was giving me the customary, slit-eyed signal to shut up. But I could tell she had my back.

"You're scaring the hell out of me," I continued. "I can't imagine what this is doing to our kids."

Murmurs of concurrence rumbled through the room. Finally, another dad said what we were all thinking:

"They're 12 years old, for God's sake."
These days, cracking the nut of education is a formidable task, and one that is made all the

more complicated by America's ongoing struggle to raise national averages and close the achievement gap.

On one hand, our policymakers are keenly aware of this problem, as they continue to concoct a variety of jujitsu-like solutions — from the president's ambitious but deeply flawed No Child Left Behind program to the ongoing experiments with charter schools, voucher programs and standardized testing.

And yet as we earnestly try to fix what's broken, we are, in the process, turning an entire generation of children into a giant flock of canaries in the coal mine. Don't get me wrong — I'm all for the heavier workload in middle school, as it helps prepare students for the academic challenges to come. But when that homework includes asking our kids to focus less on the Louisiana Purchase and star clusters and more on living up to some arbitrary, government-crunched data, then we've truly begun to lose touch with what learning is all about.

'Unrealistic expectations'

"What I find so scary is that the schools, and often the parents, are burdening children with unrealistic expectations," says Sherry Cleary, executive director of the New York City Early Childhood Professional Development Institute at City University of New York. "Instead of focusing on the real goal of education — to support

our kids' healthy development and nurture their curiosity — we're telling them, 'You have to spend the next six years of your life trying to get into an Ivy League school. It's all about the grades, not the learning.'

"And it doesn't end with test scores," Cleary adds. "Nowadays, in order to be a wholly 'attractive' child, you also need to travel around the world and have lots of civic participation."

Cleary's last words made me cringe. Only recently, Bridgette mentioned to me that she wanted to join an after-school project involved with African relief. This is typical of my oldest child — she was born with her mom's heart. What was unusual, however, was Bridgette's next comment. "And it'll look good on my résumé," she said.

I almost fell off my chair. We never speak of résumés in our house. I subsequently learned that this was what she was being told in school.

Cleary says this is common. "We deliver pure children to the schools, and then they get corrupted with the wrong motivations. It's a perverted shifting of priorities."

Already a pressure cooker

Experts point to middle school as a particularly fierce pressure cooker for kids (their hormones are on fire, notes Cleary, and they are "prey to a culture that is dragging them into adulthood"); and researchers at the Stanford University School of Education are discovering a disturbing rise in depression, anxiety and even drug abuse among some kids as a result of school-related stress.

But I fret about my 8-year-old, too. In January, she and her classmates will begin the mandatory testing required by No Child Left Behind. From experience, I know this will not be pretty.

Thankfully, some educators have begun to take action — on and off campus. Principals and administrators in 45 middle and high schools across the country have formed a support network called S.O.S. (for "Stressed Out Students") to train students in relaxation techniques, including yoga. And PBS KIDS has launched its Next Generation Media, a multiplatform learning tool (using TV, Internet and hand-held devices) designed to keep kids up to speed academically — without turning up the heat. That's entertainment? Sure. But it's also education.

Predictably, everyone from Rush Limbaugh to Jay Leno has mocked this take-back-the-classroom movement as overly P.C. and coddling. But it's not a laughing matter.

"What's at stake is the children's perception of themselves as learners," says Cleary. "Kids are supposed to ask questions; schools are supposed to provide the path to the answers. But now we're looking to the children for the answers — and the accountability. We're telling them that if they screw up, they don't have a future."

"And, trust me, when kids think they don't have a future, bad things start to happen."

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