

# END THE RACE

A **facilitation guide** to be used in  
conjunction with the screening of the film  
*Race to Nowhere*

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REEL LINK FILMS

[www.RaceToNowhere.com](http://www.RaceToNowhere.com)

[www.EndTheRace.org](http://www.EndTheRace.org)

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## 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 taking no action 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 that 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.

Dr. Gene R. Carter  
Executive Director and Chief Executive Officer, ASCD



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>PART 1: Introductory Material</b>	<b>7</b>
1 About <i>Race to Nowhere</i> .....	8
2 About this Guide .....	10
3 Letter from the Director .....	11
4 Using this Guide .....	13
a. For Parents, Guardians and Concerned Adults .....	13
b. For Educators and Administrators .....	17
c. For Students .....	20
<b>PART 2: Organizing and Facilitating a Screening of <i>Race to Nowhere</i></b>	<b>23</b>
1 Showing the Film in Your School or Community .....	24
2 Facilitation Guidelines .....	28
3 Introducing the Film .....	29
4 Facilitating a Discussion after the Film .....	30
5 Follow-up Activities Following a Showing of <i>Race to Nowhere</i> .....	32
<b>PART 3: Handouts to Distribute at Film Showings</b>	<b>35</b>
1 Tips to Regain Balance for Students, Schools and Families .....	36
2 Homework: You Can Make a Difference .....	41
3 Jumping Out of the Rat Race: AP Classes, Rankings, Testing and College Admissions .....	46
4 Taking Action: A Tool to Create Your Own Action Plan .....	51
5 Evaluation Form for Film Showings .....	52
6 Sign-up Form for Future Meetings .....	54
<b>PART 4: More In-depth Activities Centered Around the Film</b>	<b>57</b>
1 Carousel of Quotes .....	58
2 Case Studies: Learning from Success and Taking Action .....	63
3 Family Night Small Group Discussions .....	76
4 Using the Film with Students .....	78
a. Student Activity: Towards Dialogue and Change .....	78

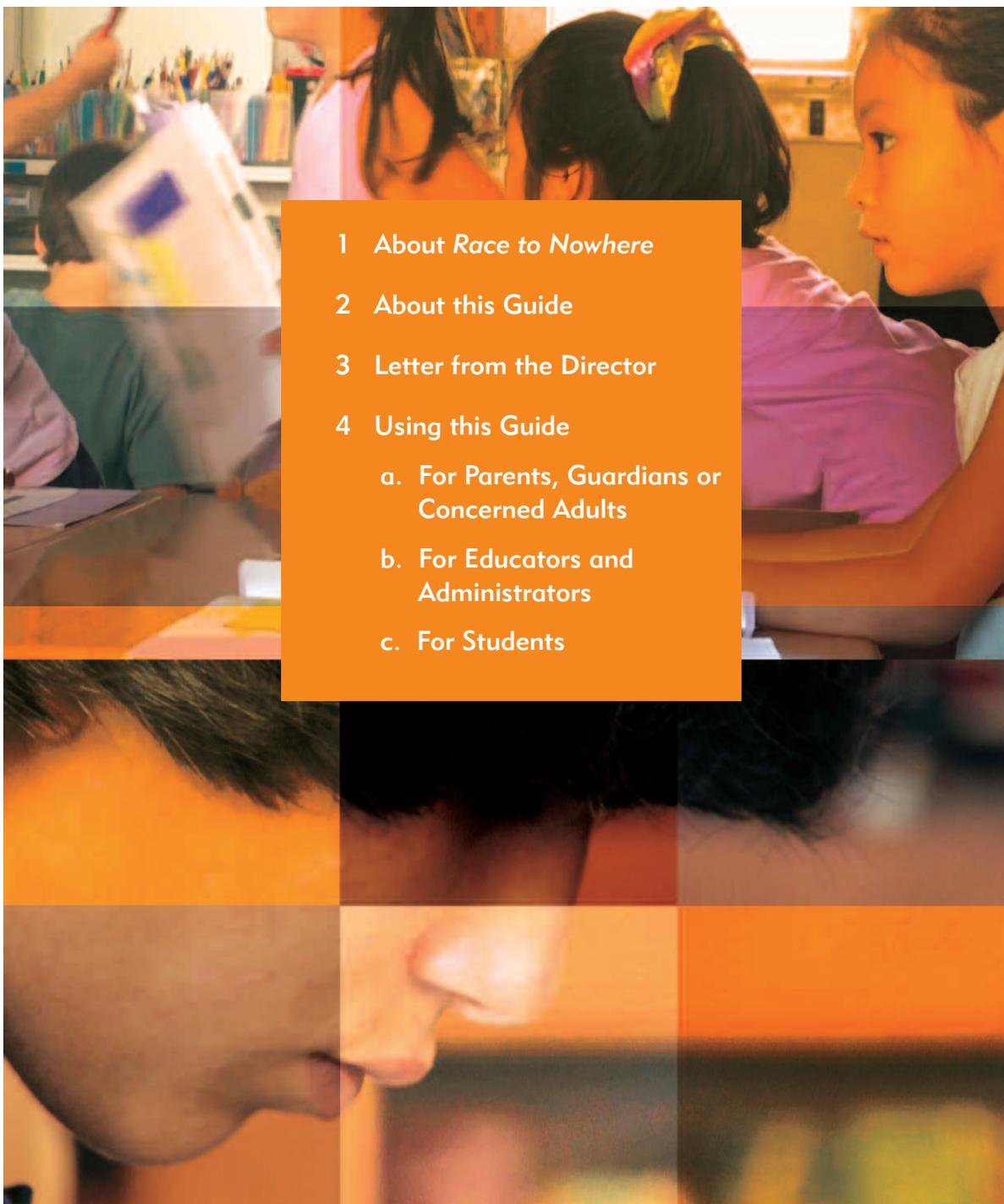
*Table of Contents continues*

b. Youth Fishbowl Listening Circles.....	80
c. Individual Youth Interviews.....	85
<b>PART 5: Models of Success</b> .....	<b>87</b>
1 Spotlight on Innovative Urban Schools .....	88
2 Innovative Suburban Schools.....	91
3 Moving Away from Standardized Curriculum: A Movement Among Independent Schools .....	93
4 Progressive Education.....	96
5 Student Engagement in Education.....	98
6 Case Studies: Interviews with Change Agents.....	99
<b>PART 6: Surveys and Sample Letters</b> .....	<b>121</b>
1 Sample Surveys.....	122
a. Student Survey About Stress.....	123
b. Parent Survey About Stress .....	134
c. Faculty Survey About Stress .....	143
2 Homework Survey.....	149
3 Sample Letters: Opting Out of Standardized Tests .....	150
4 Sample Letter Encouraging Parents to Write to Superintendents about the Issues Covered in <i>Race to Nowhere</i> .....	153
5 Sample Letter to Superintendent after Watching <i>Race to Nowhere</i> .....	154
6 Sample Letters: Homework.....	156
7 Time Management Activity for Students.....	157
<b>PART 7: Advocacy</b> .....	<b>159</b>
1 Advocacy 101 .....	160
2 Communicating with Policy Makers .....	165
3 Organizing and Facilitating Meetings.....	168
4 Sample Advocacy Letters.....	173

<b>PART 8: Research Fact Sheets</b>	<b>177</b>
<b>1 Homework Facts and Policy Changes</b> .....	<b>178</b>
<b>2 Examples of Changed Homework Policies</b> .....	<b>180</b>
<b>3 Two Parents Create a Differentiated Homework Plan</b> .....	<b>181</b>
<b>4 Assessment, Advanced Placement (AP) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB)</b> .....	<b>182</b>
a. Assessment in Early Childhood Education .....	182
b. AP: Is it Worth it?.....	183
c. The Emphasis on Breadth Versus Depth.....	183
d. The Failings of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).....	183
<b>5 Race to the Top Fact Sheet</b> .....	<b>185</b>
<b>6 The Time and Access Gap: Deepening the Divide</b> .....	<b>187</b>
<b>7 Risks to Physical and Emotional Health</b> .....	<b>189</b>
a. Stress and Young People .....	189
b. Sleep Deprivation .....	189
c. Depression and Suicide .....	190
<b>8 Factors that Promote Healthy and Resilient Youth</b> .....	<b>195</b>
<b>9 Consequences of Over-Tested, Over-Scheduled Youth</b> .....	<b>201</b>
a. Cheating.....	201
b. Disengagement .....	201
c. Play and Downtime .....	202
d. Physical Health .....	202
e. Remediation Rates in College and College Graduation .....	202
f. Tutoring and Testing .....	202
g. Use and Abuse of Drugs .....	203
h. Physical Injuries.....	203
<b>PART 9: Resources and Links</b>	<b>211</b>
<b>1 Websites/Organizations</b> .....	<b>212</b>
<b>2 Recommended Books</b> .....	<b>219</b>
<b>PART 10: Frequently Asked Questions</b>	<b>223</b>
<b>PART 11: Biographies for the Writers &amp; Film Team</b>	<b>239</b>



## PART ONE: INTRODUCTORY MATERIAL



“Seeing the stress levels in my children rise and the suicide of a 13-year-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 workplace. 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 public and private education system and our pressure-cooker 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.

Experts featured in the film include Dr. Madeline Levine, Clinical Psychologist and author of the best-seller, *The Price of Privilege*; Dr. Wendy Mogel, Clinical Psychologist and author of *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* and *The Blessing of a B Minus*; Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg, Adolescent Medicine Specialist, The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia; Dr. Deborah Stipek, Dean of the School of Education at Stanford University; Dr. Denise Pope, Lecturer at Stanford University and Co-Founder of Challenge Success and Sara Bennett, co-author of *The Case Against Homework* and Founder, Stop Homework.

***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 hundreds of thousands of students, parents, educators and concerned citizens. The goal is to use the film as a vehicle to increase awareness, generate dialogue and create the political will to transform education, redefine success for our children and safeguard their health. Reel Link Films is inviting school communities, organizations and individuals everywhere to get involved in our effort to bring this film and its message to communities nationwide.

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. It is filled with relevant research, stories of innovative schools and materials that will help your community develop a process to make meaningful and sustainable changes.

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

## LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR



Dear Parents, Teachers, Students, Administrators, Coaches and Friends,

*Race to Nowhere* came into being after a series of wake-up calls in my own family made me look closely at the pressures children 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 with 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 toward 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 professors, admissions officers and business leaders – felt powerless to protect our children’s health and well-being.

While I knew the pressures facing children 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 children 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 and engagement with learning.

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 development of critical thinking skills. As a result, many business leaders and colleges 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 retraining 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 relevance of the education they are receiving.

What finally emerged is a close-up look at the unintended consequences of the pressure-cooker culture that permeates American education. 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 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. As a parent, I've experienced the frustration of attending meetings where these issues are discussed and life for my children remained unchanged the following day. Let's not let this pattern continue. 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 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 beginning tomorrow. It is filled with relevant research; stories of schools and individuals making changes; and materials that will help your community develop a process to make meaningful changes.

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



## USING THIS GUIDE

### FOR PARENTS, GUARDIANS AND CONCERNED ADULTS

**A number of local communities have started their own groups on the End the Race website to form alliances and support communication and advocacy following the initial screening.**

If you're reading this, you have probably seen *Race to Nowhere* and are inspired to make a difference. This guide will help you do so by giving you tools to:

- 1 ● Build Community
- 2 ● Stimulate Dialogue
- 3 ● Get the Facts
- 4 ● Develop Tools and Strategies
- 5 ● Take Action
- 6 ● Stay Connected

#### 1 ● Build Community

You may already know a group of people who are interested in working with you to effect change in schools. If so, get them on board to help with a showing of the film. A small, organized group can become the basis for developing more community support and advocacy. In Part Five of the guide you will find models of how other people have created positive change in their schools. Activities to help your group delve further into the issues raised by the film are in Part Four.

#### 2 ● Stimulate Dialogue

The film itself is a great tool to start dialogue in your family, with other parents in your community, within the schools and districts your child(ren) attend and with community organizations. In Parts Two and Three there are guidelines to help you show the film and facilitate dialogue after the film. Think about how you can engage people who are already motivated around the issues and ready to get more involved. Consider reaching “beyond the choir” and introduce the issues to new audiences. Consider inviting students, educators, administrators, community members and parents to screen the film together.

### 3 ● Get the Facts

When you challenge some core values of our education system, you will find that some people will consider you unrealistic, uninformed or misinformed. It's important to be knowledgeable and to share what you know in a meaningful and non-confrontational manner. In Part Eight there are fact sheets about topics such as homework, standardized testing and health. The resource section has links to valuable websites and books. Perhaps most importantly, read about schools that have already made positive changes, starting on page 88. Check our websites [www.RaceToNowhere.com](http://www.RaceToNowhere.com) and [www.EndTheRace.org](http://www.EndTheRace.org) for regular updates to the fact sheets, resources and list of schools that are making a positive difference in children's daily lives.

### 4 ● Develop Tools and Strategies

You don't need to reinvent the wheel. Learn from the tools and strategies successfully used by other schools, educators, parents and student advocates. In the resource section, there are surveys that can be used as models for your school as well as interviews with parents, educators and administrators who have made changes in their schools. There are also links to websites for organizations working in this area and sample letters, surveys, etc. Use these as a jumping off point to develop your own tools and strategies for change.

### 5 ● Take Action

You can do this, even if it feels scary. Parents just like you who are concerned about their children's education are taking action all over the country. In the steps described below you will meet others who have similar concerns. Pick a goal that you think you can achieve in the next few months. Get others on board. When you show the film, ask people to sign up if they are interested in taking action to improve their schools. Your group might decide that you want to achieve any of the following:

- After a home screening, ask those who attended to work together to bring the film to a wider audience in your school, district and local community.
- Build relationships and form alliances with parents and attend meetings together with teachers and administrators at your schools and at your local school board.
- Try a "Listening Circle" to listen to the concerns of students (see page 80).
- Take steps to become advocates for change in your local school community and at the state and federal level. See the advocacy tips in Part Seven.

- Encourage others to join you in the effort. Possible groups to include in the dialogue and process for creating a vision for change include parents, educators, coaches, community leaders, businesses, local colleges and universities, medical professionals, parent groups, civic organizations and faith-based leaders and organizations.
- Write a letter to the local editor of your newspaper informing the press of the movement to transform education and safeguard the health and well-being of our children.
- Ask local school board members to consider what it means to educate the whole child. Advocate for a resolution supporting the education of the whole child. Ask the board to buck the tide of the competition and testing culture.
- Suggest a school or district-wide survey to get a sense of the concerns of students, parents and educators.
- Start a school or district-wide examination and revision of policies relating to testing, AP courses, homework, extracurricular demands on students and the state of the health and well-being of children. Advocate for a school climate and curriculum that fosters a love of learning. Seek out and form alliances with passionate educators and challenge those who are entrenched in a model that “worked” for them but doesn’t work today.
- Challenge practices that benefit others financially (e.g., companies that provide test preparation).
- Challenge practices that report college admissions and other data to the media.
- Challenge practices that promote competition between children and parents, e.g. honor roll bumper stickers.
- Advocate for a community-wide evening each week where there are no scheduled sports practices or homework and instead there is time and space for family and community interaction.
- Question how policies and practices impact the students and advocate for reasonable and developmentally appropriate expectations from all of the adults making demands on your children.
- Start a local End the Race to Nowhere Group on the End the Race website, [www.EndTheRace.org](http://www.EndTheRace.org), to make forming alliances and advocating for change easier.

While you're working on these goals, consider ways to engage the school and district in more system-wide changes related to teaching and learning. You may want to research how schools and programs have engaged in integrated studies and project-based learning; de-emphasized curriculum based on standardized testing; moved towards student-centered education; stopped teaching AP classes or found other innovative ways to engage all students.

Also think about what changes you may want to make in your own family. Consider how your approach to education may be creating or contributing to excess stress for your child(ren).

## 6 ● Stay Connected

Go to the End the Race website, [www.EndTheRace.org](http://www.EndTheRace.org), and join thousands of other individuals advocating for change. Use our website to connect with other individuals, post updates about your event and stay informed. After a screening, tell us about changes that have been made in your school and community.

You can also join the conversation on Facebook at [www.Facebook.com/RaceToNowhere](http://www.Facebook.com/RaceToNowhere) and on the Discussion Board on the End the Race website.

## USING THIS GUIDE

### FOR EDUCATORS AND ADMINISTRATORS

After screening *Race to Nowhere*, Bishop O’Dowd High School in Oakland, California has implemented many changes including a later start time and more time during the day for study halls.

If you’re reading this you have probably seen *Race to Nowhere* and are inspired to make a difference. This guide will help you do so by giving you tools to:

- 1 ● Build Community
- 2 ● Stimulate Dialogue
- 3 ● Get the Facts
- 4 ● Develop Tools and Strategies
- 5 ● Take Action
- 6 ● Stay Connected

#### 1 ● Build Community

You may want to start by showing this film to the entire faculty and/or sponsor a showing for everyone in the community. Try to find ways to reach “beyond the choir” and introduce the issues to new audiences. Consider a homework-free and test-free evening to encourage student attendance. Let everyone know in advance that follow-up meetings will take place to address the issues the film raises in your community. Ask for those in attendance to sign up if they are interested in engaging in a process to bring about change in your school.

Consider a variety of potential audiences with whom to start a dialogue such as school staff, parents/guardians, school boards and students. Activities to help your group delve further into the issues raised by the film are in Part Four. In Parts Two and Three you will find tools to help organize and facilitate film showings.

#### 2 ● Stimulate Dialogue

The film itself is a great tool to start dialogue in your school community. In Parts Two and Three there are guidelines to help you show the film and facilitate dialogue after the film. Think about how you can engage people who are already motivated around the issues and ready to get more involved. Consider reaching “beyond the choir” and introduce the issues to new audiences. Consider inviting students, educators, administrators, community members and parents to screen the film together.

### 3 ● Get the Facts

When you challenge some core values of our education system, you will find that some people will consider you unrealistic, uninformed or misinformed. It's important to be knowledgeable and to share what you know in a meaningful and non-confrontational manner. In Part Eight there are fact sheets about topics such as homework, standardized testing and health. The resource section has links to valuable websites and books. Perhaps most importantly, read about schools that have already made positive changes, starting on page 88. Check our websites, [www.RaceToNowhere.com](http://www.RaceToNowhere.com) and [www.EndTheRace.org](http://www.EndTheRace.org), for regular updates to the fact sheets, resources and a list of schools that are making a difference.

### 4 ● Develop Tools and Strategies

You don't need to reinvent the wheel. Learn from the tools and strategies successfully used by other schools, educators, parents and student advocates. In the resource section, there are surveys that can be used as models for your school as well as interviews with parents, educators and administrators who have made changes in their schools. There are also links to websites for organizations working in this area and sample letters, surveys, etc. Use these as a jumping off point to develop your own tools and strategies for change.

### 5 ● Take Action

Some changes require systemic change and others can be taken immediately. As a group, think about changes that you want to make right away. They could include reducing the amount of homework you assign and eliminating the grading of homework; coordinating project and testing calendars to diminish student overloading; asking for feedback from students, parents/guardians about students' learning styles and pressures felt at home; and finding more ways to nurture students' emotional and social health.

In addition, take steps to create more dialogue and get more people on board. Ask for *Race to Nowhere* to be shown at a staff meeting or community event. Encourage all stakeholders to attend screenings and follow-up meetings. Consider steps such as:

- Interview students on how the issues in the film impact them.
- Interview parents, teachers and staff on how they are impacted by the issues raised by the film.
- Reach out to other schools in your district or community to see how these issues impact other schools and work together on a vision for change.

- Consider how to implement a plan that broadens the definition of success, educates the whole child and allows for multiple pathways so that every child can be successful.
- Advocate for curriculum that focuses on developing a love of learning.
- Take a survey to get a sense of the concerns of students, parents and educators.
- Schedule a school-wide or district-wide review and revision of the homework policy.
- Set up a “Listening Circle” to listen to the concerns of students (see page 80).
- Consider a school policy that encourages students to take a balanced approach as they decide which extracurricular activities and AP courses to take.
- Adopt new and authentic ways to evaluate students other than tests and homework.
- Consider how achievements are reported in publications and the message this imparts to young people.
- Allow for more student choice and voice in the classroom.

While you’re working on these goals, consider ways to engage the school in more system-wide changes related to pedagogy. You may want to research schools and programs that have engaged in integrated studies and project-based learning, de-emphasized curriculum based on standardized testing, moved toward student-centered education or found other innovative ways to engage all students.

## 6 ● Stay Connected

Go to the End the Race website, [www.EndTheRace.org](http://www.EndTheRace.org), and join thousands of other individuals advocating for change. Use our website to connect with other individuals, post updates about your event and stay informed. After a screening, tell us about changes that have been made in your school and community.

You can also join the conversation on Facebook at [www.Facebook.com/RaceToNowhere](http://www.Facebook.com/RaceToNowhere) and on the Discussion Board on the End the Race website.

## USING THIS GUIDE

### FOR STUDENTS

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.

A class of 4th-graders at Mt. Washington Elementary School in Kentucky thoroughly researched the importance of physical activity and requested that the district address policies related to recess.

If you're reading this you have probably seen *Race to Nowhere* and are inspired to make a difference. This guide will help you do so by giving you tools to:

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- 2 ● Stimulate Dialogue
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- 5 ● Take Action
- 6 ● Stay Connected

#### 1 ● Build Community

Where should you start? You may want to start by showing this film to a small group of students. Don't just invite the students you know. It's much more effective to work with a broad-based group of people. You might be surprised at who has experiences and concerns about school that are both similar and different to yours. In Part Four you will find activities to help the group you're working with delve further into the issues raised by the film.

Once you've all seen the film, spend some time deciding who else you think should see the film and what changes you would like to see made. You may want to organize something for more students, for your school's faculty, for parents or for the larger community.

#### 2 ● Stimulate Dialogue

The film itself is a great tool to start dialogue. In Parts Two and Three of the guide there are guidelines to help you show the film and facilitate dialogue after the film.

### 3 ● Get the Facts

When you examine and challenge some core values of our education system, you will find that some people will consider you unrealistic, uninformed or misinformed. It's important to be knowledgeable and to share what you know in a meaningful and non-confrontational manner. In Part Eight there are fact sheets about topics such as homework, standardized testing, and health. The resource section has links to valuable websites and books. Perhaps most importantly, be sure to read about schools that have already made positive changes, starting on page 88. Check our websites, [www.RaceToNowhere.com](http://www.RaceToNowhere.com) and [www.EndTheRace.org](http://www.EndTheRace.org) for regular updates to the fact sheets, resources, and list of schools that are making a difference.

### 4 ● Develop Tools and Strategies

You don't need to reinvent the wheel. Learn from the tools and strategies successfully used by other student advocates. In the resource section there are surveys that can be used as models for your school as well as examples of students taking action. There are also links to websites of organizations working in this area and sample letters, surveys and other helpful items. Use these as a jumping off point to develop your own tools and strategies for change.

### 5 ● Take Action

Some changes require systemic change and others can be taken immediately. As a group, think about changes that you want to make right away. They could include reducing the amount of homework teachers assign, stopping homework assignments for weekends and/or vacations and/or having a student representative on advisory councils or school boards.

In addition, take steps to create more dialogue and get more people involved. Ask for *Race to Nowhere* to be shown at a staff meeting or community event. Consider steps such as:

- Suggest a school- or district-wide review and revision of the homework policy.
- Create a survey to get a sense of the concerns of students and educators.
- Sponsor a meeting for adults to listen to the concerns of students (see page 80).
- Suggest a school policy that supports a balanced approach to education and that moves away from a one-size-fits-all approach.

- Create a student committee at your school where students can work with educators and administrators to improve student engagement and health.
- Create a club to address the issues raised by the film and find a faculty member(s) to sponsor your group.
- Ask for student representation on the PTA and local school board. Make sure to include different types of students so that all student needs are represented.
- Use social networking sites such as Facebook to form groups advocating for change.
- Join the online community of students on the End the Race website, [www.EndTheRace.org](http://www.EndTheRace.org), and add your voice. There you may join our Student Advisory Board.

You may want to research schools nearby that have engaged in project-based learning, have integrated the arts with academics, have limited or eliminated AP classes or found other innovative ways to engage all students.

## 6 ● Stay Connected

Go to the End the Race website, [www.EndTheRace.org](http://www.EndTheRace.org), and join thousands of other young people advocating for change. Use our website to connect with other individuals, post updates about your event, and stay informed. After a screening, tell us about changes that have been made in your school and community.

You can also join the conversation on Facebook at [www.Facebook.com/RaceToNowhere](http://www.Facebook.com/RaceToNowhere) and on the Discussion Board on the End the Race website.

## PART TWO: ORGANIZING AND FACILITATING A SCREENING OF *RACE TO NOWHERE*

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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 After the Film
- 5 Follow-up Activities Following a Showing of *Race to Nowhere*



## 2.1

### SHOWING THE FILM IN YOUR SCHOOL OR COMMUNITY

#### 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 community conversation a few days to a week following 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 theater. While theaters 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, confirm the exact time, location, venue, and ticketing/RSVP procedure before you send out notices to anyone. If you're taking RSVPs, plan to accept 10% more RSVPs than you have room for and let late responders know you might be able to squeeze them in if people earlier on the list don't show.

For a more intimate discussion after the film, it is ideal to have a space where people can see and interact with each other. Many auditoriums are not conducive to communication because fixed seating can make it difficult for participants to have conversations with anyone other than the people directly around them. Cafeterias, media centers and community rooms often work well. If necessary, you can show the film in one space and have participants move to a nearby room to discuss the film.

### 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, please contact us at [screenings@racetonowhere.com](mailto:screenings@racetonowhere.com) so we can include your screening on our calendar.

**Please remember permission from Reel Link Films and a license are required for public screening.**

## 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.

If major press or television contacts you directly, please put them in touch with us at [press@racetonowhere.com](mailto:press@racetonowhere.com).

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

Make sure to have a sign-in sheet that goes around at the film. See page 54 for a registration form. 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 End the Race groups on our website [www.EndTheRace.org](http://www.EndTheRace.org) to allow for follow-up communications and advocacy after the initial meeting.

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 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* at [your location]. Give the audience a few minutes to do so.

\* On the DVD there is an introduction to the film from the Director you may play before the film.

## 2.4

### 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.

We recommend providing each member of the audience with two index cards at the beginning of the evening. After the film, tell everyone that one card should be completed during the discussion. Ask the audience to identify the top 2-3 items they would like to see addressed in your community. Let everyone know the cards will be collected during the discussion, and volunteers will tally the results and report on the same before the evening concludes. These items provide excellent information for future meetings and action. Invite audience members to use the second index card to make a personal commitment to one change as a result of viewing the film.

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.

**Hand out a brief evaluation form and action handout and ask people to fill them out. (See pages 51 through 53 for the evaluation form and action handout.)**

## 2.5

### 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? Be sure to check the activities in Part Four which can be combined with any of the following:

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 this guide.

After showing *Race to Nowhere*, Bishop O'Dowd High School, a Catholic, co-educational, college preparatory high school in Oakland, CA, 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 over 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.**

(See the resource section for sample surveys.)

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 area 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 protective factors that build resilience
- i. Satisfaction with quality of education
- j. School schedule

**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 modeled after Listening Circles so that adults can hear more about student experiences. (See Part Four, page 80 for an example of Listening Circles.)**

**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:

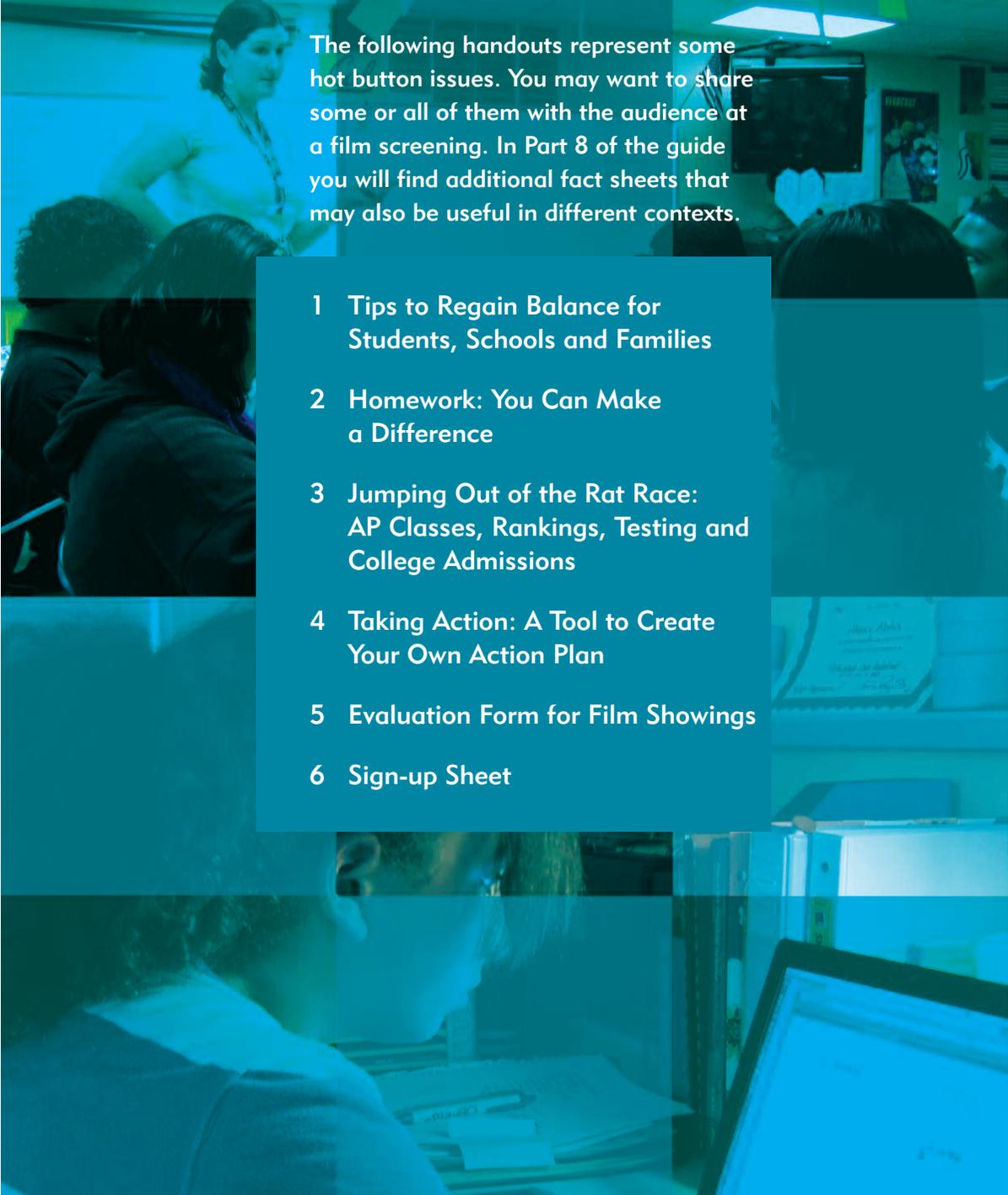
- a. What helped prepare you for your life after high school?
- b. What were the biggest sources of stress for you in high school?
- c. What helped you cope with stress? Were there ways that you coped with stress that were not helpful?
- d. What would have improved your high school experience?
- e. What's an experience you had in school that got you excited about learning?
- f. What makes a teacher "good"?
- g. 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.**  
For ideas on how to structure follow-up meetings, see Part 7 of this guide.

## 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. In Part 8 of the guide you will find additional fact sheets that may also be useful in different contexts.

- 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
- 6 Sign-up Sheet

### 3.1

## TIPS TO REGAIN BALANCE FOR STUDENTS, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES

“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. Join us on our website [www.EndTheRace.org](http://www.EndTheRace.org) and have your voice counted.

**Attend** school PTA/PTO 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/PTO and School Board.

**Sign** the End the Race petition on our website [www.EndTheRace.org](http://www.EndTheRace.org) or print it and send it to your school administrators and local school board. You may also send the letter on our website to your State Education Department and to the U.S. 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 End the Race group on our website 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.

**Share** the changes implemented in your home, class, school or community on our website [www.EndTheRace.org](http://www.EndTheRace.org).

## 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.

**Make** sleep a priority for your children.

**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.

**Allow** your children to manage homework independently.

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

**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 and 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 selections.

**Follow** your instincts.

## What Students Can Do

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

**Get** sleep. Plenty of it.

**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** extracurricular activities.

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

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

**Join** the *Race to Nowhere* student advisory board. Email [studentcontributions@reellinkfilms.com](mailto:studentcontributions@reellinkfilms.com).

**Become** part of the film and the campaign to End the Race to Nowhere. Contact us at [info@RaceToNowhere.com](mailto:info@RaceToNowhere.com) if you would like to get more involved.

**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/PTO 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.

**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. Consider reducing the number of APs that may be taken each year.

**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.

## 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 days and 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, change in appetite and sleeping patterns and unusual mood swings.

**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 children aged 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 ages 9 to 11 increased from about 2 hours and 50 minutes to more than 3 and a half 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 academic 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 affluent 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 children 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 homework.*

- Bloomfield Middle School, Bloomfield, MO
- Grant Elementary School, Glenrock, WY
- Helendale Elementary and Middle Schools, Helendale, CA
- VanDamme 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:

- Assign no homework in elementary school.
- Limit homework to two hours per night in high school and one hour per night in middle school.
- End homework assignments on weekends, vacations and over the summer. Schedule exams before holiday breaks.
- 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 homework.
- Create homework assignments specific to individual needs.
- Eliminate punitive consequences for incomplete 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.
- Consider how much class time is spent assigning and checking homework and whether that time might be more effectively used.

#### 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 to collaborate.

For more ideas and information:

<http://www.stophomework.com>

Stop Homework is a resource created by 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).

### 3.3

## 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 COLLEGE BOARD 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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

A *USA Today* analysis found that the number of students taking Advanced Placement 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 Advanced Placement tests in the USA received a failing score.<sup>12</sup>

#### Chestnut Hill, MA

The independent school, Beaver Country Day School, eliminated AP courses in 2006. Instead of AP courses 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>13</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>14</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 non-binding 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>15</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>16</sup>

## RETHINKING RANKINGS

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Every year *Newsweek* magazine ranks the “best high schools” in the U.S. 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>17</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>18</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 gives classroom teachers little or no part in decisions which determine curriculum and instructional methodology.<sup>19</sup>*

Standardized testing has been at the core of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and now Race to the Top (RTT), 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 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>20</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) or page 150 of this Guide.

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>21</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 experiences 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 downtime			
Pressure for college prep and applications			
Other (specify)			

### 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.

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

Would you be interested in contributing your story to a forthcoming book and/or completing a questionnaire that explores these issues more deeply?

Please provide your email here

\_\_\_\_\_ or email [vicki@reellinkbooks.com](mailto:vicki@reellinkbooks.com).



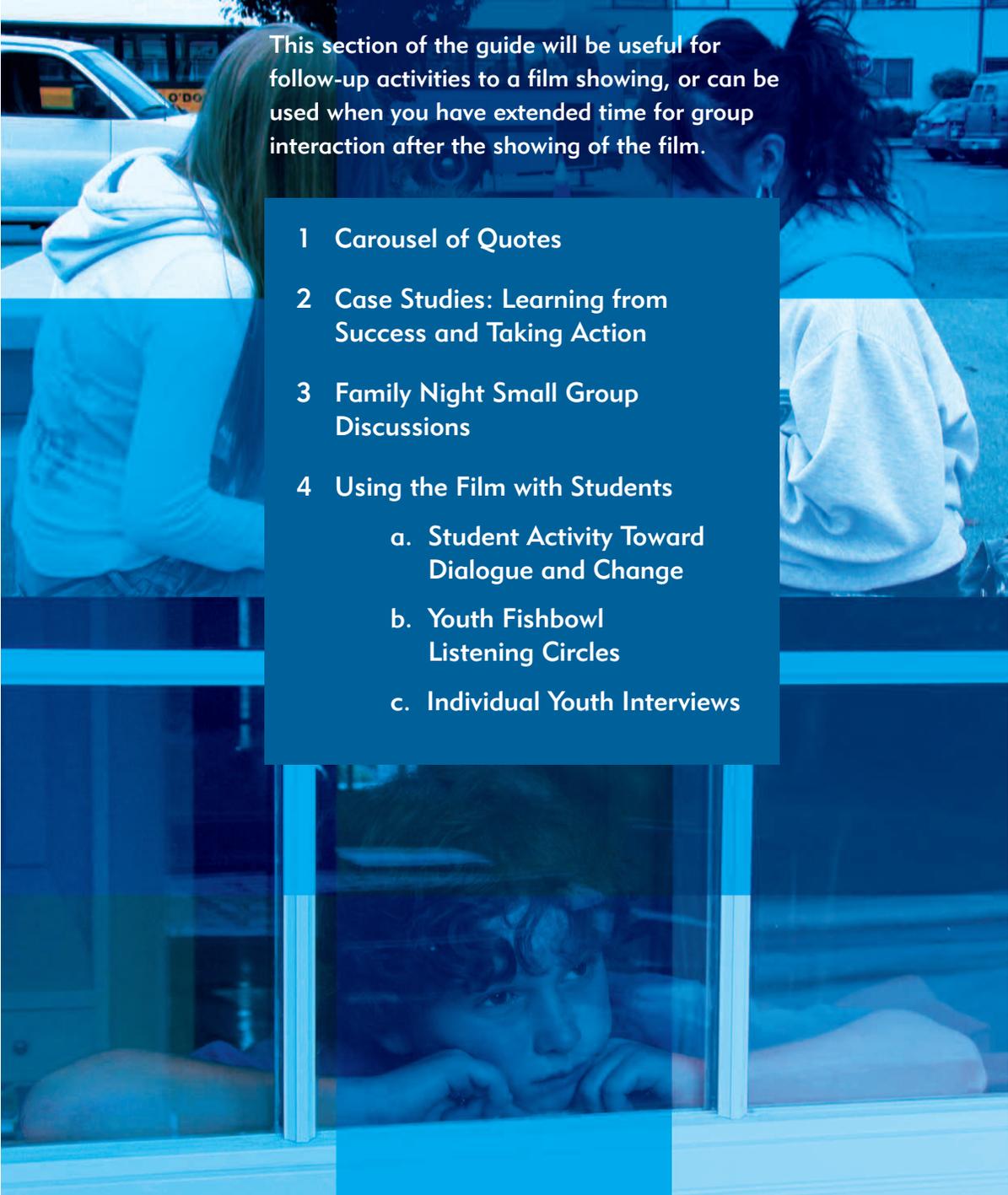
## END NOTES: PART THREE

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## PART FOUR: MORE IN-DEPTH ACTIVITIES CENTERED AROUND THE FILM



This section of the guide will be useful for follow-up activities to a film showing, or can be used when you have extended time for group interaction after the showing of the film.

- 1 Carousel of Quotes
- 2 Case Studies: Learning from Success and Taking Action
- 3 Family Night Small Group Discussions
- 4 Using the Film with Students
  - a. Student Activity Toward Dialogue and Change
  - b. Youth Fishbowl Listening Circles
  - c. Individual Youth Interviews

## 4.1

### CAROUSEL OF QUOTES

**Audience:** Community meetings with parents/guardians, PTA/PTO meetings, educators/administrators, student groups. This activity works best with a group of 10-40 people but can be modified for a larger group. (See modification below.)

**Time:** Depending on the size of the group, allot 25-40 minutes for this activity.

**Objectives:** This activity will help a group identify with themes from the film and ascertain the group's most pressing issues. It is a way for individuals 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

Choose 5-6 of the quotes provided below based on what you think is relevant to your school and community. Post each quote on a piece of chart paper and hang the papers on the walls in the room where you will be showing the film, leaving plenty of space between each paper.

#### ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

1. After the film, tell participants that quotes from the film are on each piece of chart paper posted around the room. Explain that they will have time to wander around the room and read the quotes and decide which one seems most relevant to themselves, their family and/or their school.
2. When participants are standing by the quotes that resonate with them, ask them to have a brief conversation with others gathered there to discuss why they are standing by that particular quote.
3. Ask for one or two volunteers from each group to report back to the full group the reasons that they chose a particular quote OR ask one volunteer from each small group to report back the common themes that were shared in the small group.
4. After each group has had a chance to share, ask participants to return to their seats and facilitate a full group conversation based on questions such as:
  - a. Did you expect others to have concerns similar to yours? Why or why not?
  - b. Were you surprised by what resonated for participants? Explain.

- c. Have you had conversations about these issues with others (students, educators/administrators, parents)? If so, what was the result of those conversations?
- d. Who would you like to take part in conversations about these topics?
- e. What changes would you like to see as a result of these conversations?

**Alternate Activity:** Especially good for larger groups

1. Have a handout of the quotes you want to highlight after the film.
2. Ask participants to read the quotes or ask for volunteers to read each quote out loud.
3. Ask participants to choose a quote that resonates with them.
4. If you have time and the group seems like they would be open to the idea, ask participants to turn to the person next to them and share which quote they chose and why.
5. Refer to each quote (you don't need to read it out loud again) and ask for a show of hands of how many people identified with each quote.
6. Facilitate a full group conversation based on questions such as:
  - a. Did you expect others to have concerns similar to yours? Why or why not?
  - b. Were you surprised by what resonated for participants? Explain.
  - c. Have you had conversations about these issues with others (students, educators/administrators, parents)? If so, what was the result of those conversations?
  - d. Who would you like to take part in conversations about these topics?
  - e. What changes would you like to see as a result of these conversations?

## PARENT AND EXPERT QUOTES

1. I want them to be able to do what I wasn't able to accomplish. As a young parent...I wasn't able to go back to school and get myself an education. I want them to have the things that I never was able to have.
2. I feel basically like a prison guard. That I have to constantly be asking, 'Did you do your homework? Are you done with your homework?' I personally feel a lot of anxiety about what my children are supposed to be doing.
3. Every minute of our kids' days are scheduled. They go from spending their days in school to their structured activities to hours of homework in the evenings. The only unstructured time seems to be the time they spend on the computer. I worry about the addictive nature of the time they're spending on the computer, and I worry about the isolation.
4. When...you go to the orientation at the high school [your child's freshman year] and all they talk about is what is necessary to get into college. People are raising their hands and asking about AP courses and how do you get into [a good college.] I mean you look around and you think, 'I guess this is what everybody's going to be doing.'
5. We do an awful lot of talking about kids who are stressed and are working too hard, but we sort of forget that there are just as many, if not more, kids who have taken a look at this crazy system and said, 'I'm not interested in this.'
6. You have a system that is trying to further robotize students. Mechanize them if you will, to be these academic competitors, these producers. The very nature of it in itself is very dehumanizing.

## STUDENT QUOTES

*Note: These quotes could also be used with parents/guardians. They could be asked to identify a quote that sounds the most like their child(ren).*

1. We live in a society where like oh, you have to smart, but also you have to be pretty. Also you have to do sports and have to be involved in the arts. Amongst all that you have to find something unique about yourself and you have to know yourself because if you don't know yourself before you do all that you're going to lose yourself.
2. The last time I was really excited to go to school and was excited about learning was in 4th grade. When we got to middle school I think the expectations changed a lot.
3. I've gotten this message because I'm black, because I'm living under the poverty line, you know there's so much expected of me to excel and try to be more mobile in terms of status in society – that too much is riding on my grades, you know that outside of sports, education is the only way I can earn money and, you know, live a happy American life.
4. I was in a situation where I wanted to get a good grade on a test and that meant learning everything I needed to learn the night or two nights before the test and making sure that I could memorize it and throw it back down on a test. I can't say that more than two weeks later I knew what the information was, but I know that I got a good grade on that test.
5. I've gone through bouts of depression just because you feel so swamped. There's so much work it feels like there's piles and piles of work to be done and it's all kept in your head. You don't know how to sort through it all and you don't ever think you're ever going to get it done.
6. The homework given by AP or honors classes is time consuming so you can't stay up until 11, 12, 1 o'clock in the morning doing homework each night. I know that I want that A. I want that B. I want that 3.5. That 3.8. That 4.0. When I got [a] D I couldn't cope. . . I felt so ashamed. I would say that I wanted to resort to dropping out of school, but I was really close to not caring anymore.

## EDUCATOR QUOTES

1. Things that actually get our children to think are pushed aside.
2. [We have] high-powered parents who are very competitive themselves. They'll go to parties and things and they want to be able to talk about their kid is going to be going to Harvard or the equivalent and I worry what happens when their kid is not going in that direction.
3. You have a system that is trying to further roboticize students. Mechanize them, if you will, to be these academic competitors, these producers. The very nature of it in itself is very dehumanizing.
4. It's gotten harder and harder to feel like I could teach the things I believe in versus be a yes man and sort of do what all the – what the district and the state and federally, [It puts] all the pressures on us.
5. We are teaching the majority of our kids as if they were in the top 2%. You'll see that at every level. Everything has been pushed down and we're really putting kids under a great deal of pressure to be there.
6. Because the standards are organized in sort of component skills, they often lead to teaching which is very fragmented – sort of computed teaching. It reinforces what Americans are often criticized for in their education system: of having an education system that's a mile wide and an inch deep.

The following case studies describe ways that educators, administrators and parents took steps to make their schools more student-centered learning environments. The case studies can stimulate productive conversations among members of a school community. This is a good follow-up activity for a group that has already seen the film.

**Audience:** Meetings with parents/guardians and or educators/administrators. This activity can be used in groups of any size. (See instructions below for using with larger groups.)

**Time:** Approximately 15 – 20 minutes in small groups and 30 minutes for a full group for discussion.

**Objectives:** Help participants identify ways in which they can be change agents in their school and community.

NOTE: For more examples of success stories and taking action go to page 88.

### Using the case studies in small group discussions

1. Form small groups of 4-6 people and give each group one of the case studies.
2. Ask each group to read its case study and then respond to the following questions:
  - a. How is this case study relevant to our school?
  - b. What goals might we achieve using similar strategies?
  - c. What are the next steps we would need to take to meet those goals?
  - d. What challenges might we face along the way? How could we address such challenges?
3. Ask each group to report back the successes and strategies described in the case study as well as the goals, challenges and strategies that they identified.
4. After each group has reported back, identify common goals and strategies.

\* All of the case studies used for this exercise were excerpted from interviews by Sara Bennett, the co-author of *The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It* and the founder of Stop Homework, a not-for-profit project devoted to changing homework policy and practice. Longer interviews can be found on pages 99 through 119 of the guide.

### Using the case studies with a larger group

1. Hand out the case studies to all participants and summarize each one to the group.
2. Ask different sections of the room to read and respond to different case studies.
3. Lead a discussion about the goals, challenges and strategies of the case studies, asking the group questions such as:
  - a. Which case studies are most relevant to this school?
  - b. What steps are needed to meet the goals that are identified as relevant?  
Which of these steps can be taken immediately?
  - c. What challenges might we face along the way? How could we address such challenges?

**Needham High School**, a public school in Massachusetts, decided to address academic stress and what some perceived as inflated expectations imposed upon students by some parents. The school principal at the time, **Paul Richards**, guided the process. The father of two elementary school students, Richards left Needham in 2009 to become the high school principal at the American School in London.

### Action Steps:

#### **Assess the situation:**

The school conducted surveys about stress for students, educators and parents (See pages 122 through 148 for copies of the surveys.)

#### **Reach out to parents:**

The school held several parent assemblies for high school students and had events for 8th-grade parents. Educators talked to the parents about the dangers of micromanaging and about the importance of helping students become responsible in high school so that when they graduate they can be independent.

#### **Support Students:**

The school stopped publishing the school honor roll in the newspaper.

Counselors helped students with their schedules so that when students signed up for courses, they mapped out their week, including how many hours they'd be in the classroom, hours of homework, hours on extracurricular activities, hours on personal hygiene, etc., to make sure they didn't overload themselves.

The school provided stress management for students. It partnered with the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine which provided workshops for sophomores and juniors.

The school moved towards standards-based learning, measuring kids against standards rather than homework completion. It deemphasized grades. Some teachers started grading with rubrics, which translated to a bottom-line grade, but deemphasized the 20 or 30 grades in a term, where every single piece of work counted.

Students developed a contract for their parents to sign so the parents would not constantly look at their child's electronic grade book. (This was done so parents would not monitor their children's grades every day, which created extra stress on students.)

*Further insight on the role of administrators from Paul Richards:*

One thing principals can do is determine what our relationship will be with the College Board. Some schools have dumped AP courses so that they can cover material in more depth. Still, we are stuck with state-mandated tests, and as a school, you have a legal and ethical obligation to cover the material that's going to be on the test.

## LETTING KIDS BE KIDS: A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH TO ELIMINATING HOMEWORK

**Christine Hendricks** has been the principal of **Grant Elementary**, a public K-4 school in Glenrock, Wyoming, since 1997. Hendricks had a long career as a teacher and is the single mother of a college-age daughter, a 7th-grade son, and a 5th-grade daughter. Hendricks was instrumental in eliminating homework at her school.

### Action Steps:

#### **Define the problem:**

The school had seen conflict between teachers and students and students and parents over homework for a number of years. Hendricks experienced the problem first-hand with her son, with whom she had struggled with for years about doing his homework.

#### **Learn the facts:**

The school invited Kim Bevill of Brain Basics in Colorado to conduct a workshop. Bevill debunked myths about the value of homework. As a result of the workshop 10 teachers proposed to Hendricks that the school eliminate homework and she agreed to try it.

#### **Unite educators:**

The school's 25 teachers bought into the idea from the beginning. Teachers noted that some kids had 60 minutes a day of extra reading and thought if students were getting that much, they had to need a break by the end of the day.

#### **Educate parents:**

Hendricks contacted Sara Bennett of Stop Homework, who gave her a letter another principal had written to his parents when he had taken a similar step. She adapted that letter and sent it out. While many parents were grateful, some parents wanted homework. The staff decided in advance that if parents asked for homework, the teachers would give them packets. In the beginning, many parents were coming in and asking for packets. But that tapered off as the year went on. Hendricks thinks that parents realized their children were doing fine without the homework.

#### **Encourage non-structured reading:**

Educators didn't require out-of-school reading but encouraged it. Parents whose kids were struggling with reading started coming in and saying, "You know, he likes to read again."

**Document results:**

The school's test scores have continued to rise. The school surveyed families and found that students had more time to play outside, more family dinners, more reading and an improved attitude towards school.

*Further insight from Christine Hendrick:*

So many of our students are coming to school in survival mode, and I think, as a school we need to help let kids be kids ... I don't believe in high-stakes tests. I wish they'd let us show that we've grown a kid each year rather than show how the child has done on one test.

Jodie Leidecker, a native Kentuckian, lives in Berea, Kentucky, with her husband and their two children, a 9th grader and her currently home-schooled 10-year-old. She pushed her local elementary school to institute daily recess and is now working on a state-wide initiative to do the same. She is also trying to get her local schools to reduce homework loads.

### Action Steps:

#### **Learning facts and setting achievable goals:**

Leidecker became an activist after attending school advocacy classes at Forward in the Fifth (Congressional District) which runs classes to help parents understand school governance and become education advocates. The lack of recess was a recurring concern for parents who participated in the class that Leidecker attended. One day, research was presented which conclusively showed that kids benefit from recess. Leidecker recalled that her reaction to the research was "Well, my gosh, at least we can do this. This is something simple."

#### **Communicating with other parents:**

Leidecker started talking to other parents about the importance of recess. She made and distributed informational flyers, informing parents about School Board meeting times and how to contact Board members. People began calling the school and talking to their parent representatives on the Site-based Council.

#### **Approaching school-based institutions:**

Leidecker brought the issue to the Site-based Council, and they told her it was an issue for the School Board. So she went to the School Board and was told it was an issue for the Site-based Council.

#### **Creating a parent petition:**

Leidecker got 500 people to sign a petition to the Council, which she also sent to the State Board of Education. Soon after this, the Council made the decision that elementary children could have 15 minutes of recess a day.

#### **Taking it to the state:**

After getting recess in her local school, Leidecker wanted to see every school in Kentucky give their children recess. She started calling legislators, and got friends around the state to put up flyers which said to call the legislative hotline. She got her legislator to agree to sponsor a bill.

*Further insight from Jodie Leidecker*

Following her success with recess, Leidecker is trying to decrease the student homework. Here's what she has to say about her new initiative:

I got a good response from parents. A lot of them told me, 'Oh, I hate homework; it's horrible for our family,' but no one contacted anyone or said anything to the school. So I contacted the school myself. The elementary school principal told me that there was already a homework policy in place and that he would remind the teachers not to exceed the time limits of 20 minutes in grades 1-3 and 20-40 minutes in grades 4-5.

## DEVELOPING CREATIVE AND CRITICAL THINKERS

Riverdale Country School, an independent K-12 school in New York City, looked for methods to help students be creative and critical thinkers. **Dominic Randolph** is the head of the school. Before Riverdale, Randolph was an administrator at a boarding school for grades 9-12. Randolph's wife is also an educator, and their daughter is a sophomore in college. Strategies that he implemented and observed at both schools include:

### Assessed students' knowledge retention:

Randolph's previous school did an experiment to see whether students understood major concepts. At the beginning of students' junior year, teachers gave them the same chemistry exam that they'd taken in the spring of their sophomore year. Many students did not pass the same test in the fall. This prompted teachers to rethink their teaching practices.

### Allowing for creative, in-depth teaching:

Randolph recalls an English teacher who started "workshop writing." Instead of writing 10 papers in a 10-week trimester, students did two or three, thus enabling them to focus on the quality of papers instead of the quantity. Randolph said that the overall learning experience was of a much higher quality. The course led to an ongoing dialogue between the teacher and her students, rather than the more typical pattern where a student would write a paper, get a few comments and go on to the next assignment.

### Formative assessments for students:

Teachers at Riverdale take notes about the students, their work, the kinds of questions they ask, rather than just assessing them at certain prescribed times of the year and averaging those assessments into a grade. Randolph compares this with how he works with teachers, noting that he doesn't give them tests but works with them collaboratively and gives them feedback. He thinks what works well with teachers works well for students as well.

### Advanced Placement classes:

Riverdale Country School dropped the AP designation because they wanted students to have more time to think and be reflective.

*Further insight on the role of administrators from Dominic Randolph:*

Recently, I attended 11th grade for three full days as though I were a student. I found the fractured nature very complicated to navigate. There wasn't nearly enough time to reflect on what I was learning. Understanding students' wishes and aspirations and their experiences is key. A lot of stress comes from the feeling that life is fragmented, that you're doing something because you have to. But if school is meaningful, if students are passionate about what they're learning, their stress will be reduced.

## PARENT ACTIVISM: CHANGING HOMEWORK POLICY

Kerry Dickinson, a former teacher, lives in Danville, California with her husband and sons who are in 10th and 8th grade. She decided she wanted to change her school's homework policy when her oldest son was in 8th grade. That year her son went from being engaged with school to actively hating it. Dickinson felt that the amount and type of homework her son was assigned contributed to his disengagement with school. She and her friend Julie Kurtz helped convince her local school district to rewrite its homework policy. She now has her own blog, East Bay Homework Blog, <http://eastbayhomework.blogspot.com/>. Dickinson plans to resume her teaching career.

### Action Steps:

#### **Develop allies:**

Dickinson and Kurtz sent out an email to 10 friends and held an informal meeting at Dickinson's home. The group discussed the book, *The Homework Myth* by Alfie Kohn to more closely examine problems with the use of homework in many schools in the U.S. They decided they wanted to change the district's homework policy. To that end, Dickinson and Kurtz requested a meeting with the district's Director of Curriculum Instruction.

#### **Gather and present information:**

Before meeting with the school administrators, they developed an informal survey about homework that they administered to 100 parents/guardians. Forty-five percent of those surveyed expressed dissatisfaction with the school's use of homework. When they met with district administrators, Dickinson and Kurtz brought the results of the survey, Kohn's book, some relevant articles and a copy of the District Policy.

#### **Work with school-based institutions:**

At the meeting, administrators were receptive to the parents' concerns. Within a week, administrators agreed that the policy was out-dated and invited Kurtz and Dickinson to be on a task force to rewrite the district homework policy. The group met twice a month for six months and agreed upon a new policy that addressed the importance of family time. The revised language was partially based on a new policy from Toronto, Canada. Kurtz and Dickinson did not get everything they wanted in the policy, including a homework opt-out option and a clause to prevent punitive measures for students who don't complete homework. They were, however, pleased with the initial results.

**Follow-up:**

Dickinson now has a voice in the school and contacts teachers or administrators about concerns as they arise. For example, her son's middle school instituted a "Zeros Aren't Permitted Policy" which required students to finish incomplete homework during lunchtime. She wrote a detailed email to the principal about why this was a bad idea, and the school made the program voluntary.

She also asked the district to change the home page on its electronic grading and assignment website so that students wouldn't see their grades as soon as they log on. This helped students and parents who chose to close the grade "dashboard" to be less focused on grades.

*Further insight about relieving stress at home from Kerry Dickinson:*

In my own home, I almost never say the 'H' word any more. I do not require my kids to come home and do homework. I encourage them to go out and run around or 'chill out.' I almost never help them with homework. If they ask, I'll help, but I don't hyper-parent their homework and tests like I used to. I've encouraged my older son not to add an extra class into his high school schedule. I think an extra hour of sleep is more important. And, I moved my laptop out of the kitchen and into our home office. I didn't want to model working 24/7 and not give my kids my full attention when they were talking to me.

Torri Chappell lives in San Anselmo, California and has been working in education for more than 25 years in different capacities: as a full-time teacher, a science specialist at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, a private tutor specializing in tutoring emergent readers and a parent educator. She has two children: a high school junior and a college sophomore. She began speaking out as a parent and as an educator when her first child entered kindergarten. With the support of other parents, she started to work on developing an alternative program of choice in the elementary school in her town.

### Action Steps:

#### **Speak up for your child and the community:**

When Chappell's youngest child was in kindergarten, his school district adopted the Open Court reading program, which is very scripted, teaches to the test and uses one-minute timed reading on children as young as six years old. Chappell started speaking out against that and the STAR (Standardized Testing and Reporting) test. Her son took it in second grade, but she opted him out of the test in third grade.

#### **Empower others:**

Because Chappell was always vocal, she got dozens and dozens of calls from parents and teachers who said, "I agree with you, but don't tell anyone." She gave parents advice about how to ask respectful questions of the teachers and how to advocate for their children. She used her experience as a tutor to reassure their parents when she recognized that the school's expectations weren't attuned to the developmental stages of children. Her goal was to empower parents.

#### **Get involved in community initiatives:**

Chappell became a member of the Site Council and the Coordinating Council. She started a recycling program and was involved in other positive ways in the schools.

*Race to Nowhere* was shown at her daughter's high school to more than 500 people. The principal denied that there was a problem with stress and overloading the students. So Chappell wrote a letter and successfully advocated for a follow-up meeting at the school. About 30 people came and she asked for action such as stopping homework assignments over holidays. She is still pushing for results.

Chappell joined a coalition for social justice and is currently working with six after-school programs that teach second-language learners. As an advocate for these students, she recently spoke out against standardized testing at a school board meeting, addressing how timed testing creates barriers for English language learners.

*Further insight about effective advocacy from Torri Chappell:*

I try to pay attention to being more for something than against, to do my best to not be combative. I'm finding that defensiveness is rampant and the fear is taking over. I suggest that people try to get as many others as they can to join you so you can feel supported, be supported, and have there be more voices. And it's important to get the dads involved, too.

## FAMILY NIGHT SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

**Audience:** Community meetings designed to bring parents/guardians and students together. Invite teachers and administration as well. This can work with any size group if time and space allow.

**Time:** In addition to the film showing, allot 40 - 60 minutes for discussions/activities.

**Objectives:** This activity will increase dialogue among parents/guardians and students about critical issues raised in the film.

**Preparation for activity:** If possible, identify facilitators for small group discussions. If that is not possible, have a sheet with discussion questions (see below) copied for each group.

### Activity Instructions:

1. **After the film, have the audience form groups of 8-10 people. Depending on the size of the group you can do this by having people count off, by separating out by role/job type, or by area of the room that they are sitting in. Alternatively, you can provide each person who walks in with a number or a color that designates what group they will be in. This activity can be done with groups that mix students and adults together in the small groups or that separate them into separate groups. If you have separate groups, make sure to focus on the responses to question (e) below when the full group reconvenes.**
2. **In small groups, discuss any of the following questions:**
  - a. What resonated for you in this film?
  - b. Do you think any of the situations described by people interviewed are relevant to your situation or your school? Why or why not?
  - c. For students only: What helps you balance your life so you have time and energy for school, extracurricular activities, friends and family? Are there specific things that you, the school or your parents/guardians could be doing to help you find that balance?
  - d. Did watching this film motivate you to make changes in your school or in your life? If so what?
  - e. What's something that you want (adults or students) to know about the way in which you connected or did not connect to this film?

f. Is there something specific that you'd like to commit to doing – either for yourself or for the school – after watching this film?

**3. Bring small groups back together. Ask for people to volunteer something about what they learned in their group discussion, particularly in response to questions c, d, e and f above.**

**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 papers 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 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.

## YOUTH FISHBOWL LISTENING CIRCLES\*

The Youth Listening Circle is a highly adaptable, strengths-based process that uses basic dialogue concepts and a simple structure to encourage young people to express their opinions, ideas and concerns about themselves and issues involving their school and education. The purpose is to provide an opportunity for adults to hear what young people need from them to be healthy and successful. As a strengths-based process it is important that the questions NOT be asked in the context of “what is wrong” but rather be asked in the context of what is needed from adults and schools so that they – the youth – can be healthy and successful.

The reversal of formal roles, where young people speak and adults listen, makes a strong impression on young people and adults alike. Youth take the role very seriously and appreciate the opportunity to speak about what is important to them. The youth learn that young people of different backgrounds have very similar perspectives on many important questions and they develop greater respect for both their similarities and their differences. The adults learn that youth understand a great deal about themselves and their educational environment and that youth value the adults who genuinely want to help them. The young people have realistic ideas about changes that can be made to make schools and education better and are willing to share responsibility for making changes happen. The adults and youth in partnership develop strategies for change that will make a clear difference and begin to strengthen adult/youth relations. The youth fishbowl focus group process is being used successfully with youth of all ages to improve their health, education, schools and communities.

### Listening Circle Reminders

#### Youth

- Should represent the program, school, etc. as a whole (all ethnic, racial, social, and cultural groups, abilities and levels of success).
- Serve as participant researchers.

#### Adults

- Watch, listen and take notes. Do not speak.
- There is no direct interaction between the youth and the adult observers during the listening group.

\* Bonnie Benard, Carol Burgoa, & Sara Truebridge  
*Adapted from Youth-Led Focus Group Self-Study Toolkit, Laboratory Network Program, 2000*

## Listening Circle agreements

### Youth agree to:

- Turn off cell phones/no texting.
- Focus on what you do like/want/need.
- Only use names for positive comments.
- Be respectful of each other.
- Remember time limitations.
- Speak your truth!

### Adults agree to:

- Turn off cell phones/no texting.
- Stay for the entire listening circle.
- Be silent during listening circle.
- Keep the comments offered by youth anonymous (except for mandatory reporting).
- Commit to a plan of action that reflects the young people's perspectives.

## Before the Listening Circle Session

### Introductions

Before the listening circle begins, the adult facilitator welcomes the young people, introduces him/herself and asks the youth to introduce themselves to each other and write their first names on their name badge. The adult facilitator then gives an overview of the listening circle process, stresses how important their ideas are and reassures the young people that their specific comments are to be kept confidential. The facilitator presents the Youth Agreements and asks for any others they need for this to be a safe and comfortable process. Four to six questions, printed on separate and differently colored cards, are distributed and explained to the youth. Ample time is given so that they may write their responses to each question on the cards and ask for any clarification. Writing their responses help the young people keep track of their thoughts while others are speaking during the listening circle process. This preliminary process is best done away from the adult observers in a separate, quiet room.

## During the Listening Circle session

### **Seating**

The youth should be seated in a circle with the adults sitting around them in a larger circle, fishbowl style.

### **Welcome**

The facilitator welcomes the adults, explains the process, asks if they can agree to the Adult Agreements, and reminds them that their role is to listen to the young people. No one should be let in or out of the room during the session and all cell phones and pagers should be turned off. The youth then go around the circle and introduce themselves by first name only. If appropriate, grade level, school site, etc. may be added.

### **Asking Questions**

No more than six questions should be asked, one at a time, for the group to answer. As each question is asked, the facilitator calls on one youth at a time, going around the circle in order. The process continues with one person at a time answering the same question. After everyone has had an opportunity to offer their response, the facilitator asks participants if there are any additional ideas that have not been expressed. After all questions have been asked, if there is adequate time the facilitator may ask additional questions to clarify or obtain more detailed information.

### **Closure**

The facilitator thanks the young people for their participation and contribution and invites them to be involved in any planning process that will result because of the focus group information. The youth should then be asked to express their feelings on the experience of being formally listened to by the adults. The adults should also be asked to express their feelings on the experience of listening. The adults may ask the youths clarifying questions at this time.

### **Youth Development Planning**

The planning session begins with a dialogue about the themes and key points made by the youth. Once the concerns and recommendations of the young people have been identified, the discussion should identify possible resolutions that reflect the youth responses. If youth have been invited to participate in the planning, they should be asked for

clarification details and their recommendations for solutions. Next steps should be identified and responsibilities assigned. If youth have NOT been invited to participate in this planning process, the recommended next steps should be presented to them for their feedback. Creating a structure for ongoing youth involvement in program improvement is also a task of this planning group.

#### **Program/Public Announcement**

Some form of public announcement should be made to confirm the changes that will be made as a result of the youth listening circle process.

### SUGGESTED QUESTIONS:

(We recommend that you limit the number of questions to six.)

1. What does it mean to be a successful student here? Do you feel a wide range of attributes are valued?
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?

## INDIVIDUAL YOUTH INTERVIEWS

**Audience:** Middle or high school students. Screen the film for the entire student body or a group of students representing the diversity of the student body.

**Time:** Allow for time over the week or two following the film during lunch or study halls for individual interviews to be conducted with students by administrators, teachers and or/parent volunteers.

**Objectives:** To authentically listen to the voices of a broad range of students to learn what they need in order to feel supported by the school. It is important to have a leader at the school willing to make changes that reflect the concerns raised by the students.

**Interview instructions:** Conduct interviews with students that allow for students to share ways in which the issues raised by the film are relevant to them and their school life. Use the questions on the prior page as a potential framework for the interview.



## PART FIVE: MODELS OF SUCCESS

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This segment of the guide provides inspiration by highlighting students, administrators, educators and parents who have successfully brought about change in their communities. Please also visit the *Race to Nowhere* website for a list of schools and communities making changes.

- 1 Spotlight on Innovative Urban Schools
- 2 Innovative Suburban Schools
- 3 Moving Away from Standardized Curriculum: A Movement Among Independent Schools
- 4 Student Engagement in Education
- 5 Progressive Education
- 6 Case Studies: Complete Interviews of Change Agents from Case Studies in Part 4 of this Guide

### High Tech High (HTH), San Diego, California

HTH is a public charter school that started in San Diego, California in 2000 and has expanded to run five high schools, two middle schools and one elementary school. HTH describes its curriculum as framed around answering questions and solving problems:

**Integration at HTH means that we address issues as they are found in the real world – in teams, studying questions and themes that cut across academic disciplines. It means that teachers work together to develop a coherent curriculum and program. In a well-integrated curriculum unit, students experience themselves as pursuing one important question or theme rather than taking six courses.**

The school has won wide acclaim for engaging students and helping them develop strong academic skills:

‘It’s easy for kids to lose their way and disengage from their education,’ said Larry Rosenstock, the founding principal. But High Tech High, founded to combat student disengagement and low academic achievement, works by offering personalized, project-based learning combined with limited lectures and traditional Socratic methods – described by Rosenstock as ‘an integration of head and hands.’

‘It’s behaving like a journalist, behaving like a scientist, making documentary films, building hovercraft and submersibles, getting patents. There’s an integration of secondary and post-secondary, because a high school diploma is insufficient in today’s world.’<sup>22</sup>

Much of the academic learning occurs in project based, interdisciplinary projects, some of which can be seen online at <http://www.sdn.com/sandiego/2009-05-22/news/education/sample-high-tech-projects>, as well as on the school’s website.

Projects include:

**Media Saves the Beach** – Eleventh-grade students test local watersheds for their biological health and transform the experimental knowledge and their experiences into multimedia pieces.

**Writing on the Walls** – Through this multidisciplinary project, students at HTH North County explore and address an issue of concern in their community: the prevalence of tagging and graffiti.

**Picasso’s Influence on High Tech High** – Similar to the show that traveled international modern art museums, the students at High Tech High create art that references Picasso’s contributions.

**Science Friction** – Science Friction helps students understand that physics is all around us, even on the very ground we walk on. Movie theaters, which are notorious for having sticky floors, were the inspiration for this project.

**Public Service Advertising Campaign** – Groups are assigned to create an advertising campaign focusing on a social issue. Each group chooses an organization (e.g., D.A.R.E., Operation Smile, ONE) that offers support for those affected by their chosen issue.

**Graph-It Design** – For the Graph-It Design project, each student used Excel software to create his/her own “mathterpiece” of an image pertaining to a historical figure.

The school’s interdisciplinary, project-based approach has helped a diverse student body prepare for college. The school reported that:

- **55% of students are the first generation in their family to attend college.**
- **88% of their poorer students on free or reduced school lunches completed a college degree.**
- **99.5% of students have gone to college.**<sup>23</sup>

### The Fenway High School, Boston, MA

The Fenway High School was founded in 1983 as a separate academic program for 90 students who were disengaged from high school. In 1994 it became a pilot school within Boston public schools. It is associated with the Coalition for Essential Schools and emphasizes project-based learning. For example, the school’s humanities curriculum rotates on a three-year cycle so that all students in grades 9-11 address the same historical periods, social and political issues, and literary themes concurrently. The course content is organized around one essential question each year, such as “What does it mean to be human?” or “How do you do the right thing in

the face of injustices?” The school’s math curriculum emphasizes cooperative group work and the development of communication skills, both written and oral, in the medium of math. All regular education students take pre-calculus, and some take calculus, before they graduate from Fenway.<sup>24</sup>

Fenway also helps students deal with the stressors that are common among low-income youth in cities. The school’s physical education teacher Julio Avila invited a stress trainer to work with his freshmen because he sees students struggling with a host of non-academic stresses. “They have jobs after school,” Avila said. “They have to baby-sit their siblings. They’re concerned about safety in their neighborhoods. And they don’t have the luxury of having parents who drive them to swimming and gymnastics programs after school.”<sup>25</sup>

Fenway students do well on the Massachusetts state tests (MCAS), typically surpassing city and state averages. Additionally, Fenway’s graduation and college admissions data exceed the city and state averages. 87% of Fenway students who come in as freshmen graduate in four years, and 88% of graduates are admitted to college. In a 2005 Boston Private Industry Council study, more Fenway graduates remained in college past their first year than graduates from any other Boston high school (excluding the three exam schools).

Fenway’s success with students, who might otherwise be disengaged from high school, including those with moderate to severe learning disabilities, has earned the school a number of awards, including the designation as one of the original ten New American High Schools.

### Venture School, San Ramon, CA

Venture is an alternative, independent K-12 and Adult public school with a highly successful and well-developed approach to custom tailoring curriculum to meet the unique needs of each student while meeting state standards and benchmarks. Venture is unique in that a very special nurturing relationship is formed between teachers and students in individual meetings. Through independent study and small class instruction, Venture's flexible curriculum meets the needs of all students. Each student's educational program is tailored to meet his or her specific needs, learning style, interests, aptitudes and passions. Students learn at their own pace and skill level. The net effect is the student's commitment to learning – a commitment that results from a focus on the student as customer, the empowerment of the student as a learner and the student's own positive experience with continuous improvement.

Venture teachers mentor and work one on one with each student, custom tailoring the curriculum to the needs of the student while addressing the content standards and graduation requirements of the State of California. The school recognizes that students must play an integral part in designing the learning process and content and takes a different approach to bring out the best in every student. Venture has been the school of the 2007 National Spelling Bee champion, a musical and math prodigy, and is also home to many students who were falling behind and in danger of dropping out of school or not graduating in their prior schools. Venture is ranked in the top ten percent of alternative public schools and in the top 20 percent of all high schools in the State of California.

Venture's success with an increasing wide variety of students is in great part due to the flexibility of the program, the dedication of the staff and the willingness to bend the system to meet the needs of individual students from the gifted, disenfranchised, otherwise occupied – to the academically challenged. It is a model for success for all.

Venture provides the gift of time – the musician can practice, the athlete can train, the dancer and actor can rehearse, the academically struggling can have more time to work on challenges and those who need to escape the social pressures of large schools can release that pressure – all while getting a quality education, rekindling the love of learning within the context of a fully accredited high school, and going on to all levels of higher education and lifelong learning. The relationships formed while at Venture very often last a lifetime.

### VanDamme Academy, Aliso Viejo, CA

Since its doors opened in 2001, VanDamme Academy, a private K-8 school in Aliso Viejo, CA, has boasted both an exceptional academic curriculum and a “no homework” policy. Schools have long fallen into two main camps: rigorous, academic, prep-school types that demand cramming, impose uniform and inflexible standards of performance, and assign hours upon hours of homework, and those that call for the more natural and spontaneous development of the child, allowing for more time for creative play, and rejecting traditional academics as a tyrannical imposition on childhood. The goal at VanDamme Academy has been to reconcile that false dichotomy, offering children “a great education at school and family time at home.”

VanDamme Academy graduates are expert grammarians, have mastered the art of writing, have devoured dozens of literary classics, grasp principles of science that give order and intelligibility to the world around them, know the essential history of the world, and, at a minimum, have completed algebra – and all of that while taking home nothing more than a chapter from their novels. More important, given a curriculum that stresses the value of the knowledge to them, and not grades; that is taught by passionate experts in their fields, and not coaches helping them to prepare their college resume; that is taught efficiently and well during the school day, and not sent home to create a battlefield with mom and dad – the students love school.

The school’s philosophy is that a school is to give children the knowledge and skills they need to become informed, clear-thinking, ambitious, fulfilled, happy adults. And they believe that the best way to accomplish this goal is to focus on the academic essentials at school, to teach them purposefully, efficiently, and enthusiastically, and to leave the children their afternoons and evenings to spend quality time with their families, to pursue their personal passions and to play. Students strike observers as being exceptionally well-educated, mature and *joyful*.

## MOVING AWAY FROM STANDARDIZED CURRICULUM: A MOVEMENT AMONG INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

The Independent Curriculum Group (ICG) is a consortium of college preparatory schools that have de-emphasized curriculum driven by standardized testing. The organization's website makes the case for independent rather than standardized curriculum.

The Independent Curriculum Group maintains that many schools would like to move away from standardized curriculum but fear parental opposition. The website notes that when an article appeared in *The New York Times* describing Scarsdale High School's decision to drop AP, an administrator at a nearby school circulated it to his colleagues under the heading, "Do we have the guts?" The Independent Curriculum group is dedicated to showing that students in schools which drop AP courses and adopt independent curriculum can get into the same colleges that accept students who have taken AP courses.

Below is an excerpt from "twenty of the most fundamental benefits of curricular independence" (<http://www.independentcurriculum.org/index.php/icg/index/drop>):

### Independence Promotes Deep Learning

Students and teachers in standardized environments cover material for an exam and have little time to linger on in-depth activities. Over and over again, you'll read about how ICG schools prefer more focused courses that cover fewer topics in greater depth. "With AP, you're always having to throw away interesting stuff," said Kwesi Koomson of Westtown School, Westtown, PA. "We have more thinking and more discussion, instead of lecturing and having to get through the material."

### Independence Promotes Student-Centered Learning

Traditional courses in U.S. history cover the colonial period to the present. Test-driven biology courses generally include the same labs every year. In any coverage course, the teacher must stick to an agenda in order to keep the class on schedule. Student-centered activities can be shoehorned into the syllabus, but only in carefully limited doses. Interactivity is a hallmark of ICG classrooms, where student interaction often determines the direction of a course. "The best teachers are the ones who get students talking to students," said Kirk Smothers of Calhoun School, New York, NY.

### **Independence Allows Learning Outside the Classroom**

Only the material in textbooks ever appears on a standardized test. To prepare for a test, students must turn away from what is happening around them in the community and the wider world. At ICG schools, many advanced courses are built to carry students beyond the walls of the school. One example is a class on the Civil Rights Movement at Carolina Friends School, Durham, NC, which traveled to Selma and made an oral history video out of the memories of twelve senior citizens from the area.

### **School-As-Test-Prep Prepares Students for Yesterday**

What are the crucial issues facing today's world? To get an idea, survey the titles of advanced courses at ICG schools, which include: "The Middle East Cauldron: Historical Perspectives" (The Putney School, Putney, VT), "Genetics" (The Urban School, San Francisco, CA), "Environmental Politics" (Calhoun School, New York, NY), and "East Meets West: Viewing the Other in Art, Literature, and Politics" (Fieldston School, New York, NY). As one student said about "Hiroshima to 9/11" at Westtown School, "It's a course about our world right now. We're able to have a dialogue about the events we're living in." On standardized exams, only yesterday's major issues appear.

### **Standardized Tests Measure Only One Kind of Intelligence**

The CEO of the Educational Testing Service told Bloomberg News that he "did very poorly" on the SAT. The head of College Board told the same reporters that he "did terrible on these kinds of tests." But these men clearly have many abilities. ICG schools seek to eliminate the disconnect between success in school and success in real life. Read about The White Mountain School's (Bethlehem, NH) innovative Learning Outcomes that give students a holistic sense of themselves as learners and people.

### **Standardized Courses Marginalize Project-Based Learning**

Test-driven courses end in an exam. Most advanced courses at ICG schools emphasize projects. While tests merely require a review of work already done, projects require students to apply knowledge in a new context toward a meaningful product. Check out how Beaver Country Day School (Chestnut Hill, MA) uses projects to promote deeper learning, and read about Project Week at The Putney School or Senior Projects at the Academy at Charlemont (Charlemont, MA).

### **Labels Such as AP Crowd Out Interesting Courses**

Most students take AP courses because they will "look good." Often, that means bypassing other courses that may be more appealing but do not carry the AP

label. Read about the student at Fieldston School who wrote an English paper about how students took less interesting courses because they carried the AP label. This student urged Fieldston to drop AP, and three years later, it did.

### **School-As-Test-Prep Creates School Stress**

In the real world, people work hard to excel in a profession of interest to them. In most schools, students rarely get to follow their interests. Everyone takes the same courses, and learning is merely an arena for competition between students to get good grades, and to get a high score on the exams. Bonus points come to the students who can take the largest number of these courses at the same time. Students in non-AP schools work just as hard, but their focus delves deeper into the content of what they are learning about.

### **Labels Such as AP Cause Turf Wars Among Teachers**

In test-driven schools, teachers and departments tend to fight over class time because of coverage pressure. The problem is particularly acute in the sciences, where teachers often lobby for extra class periods, or schedule cram sessions outside of normal school hours to cover material that cannot be wedged in during class time. No such problem exists at post-AP schools, where staff can build a school schedule that serves the needs of all students.

### **Labels Such as AP Divert Resources Toward Some Students at the Expense of Others**

AP divides schools into haves and have-nots. Teachers in the AP track get prestige and resources. Non-AP teachers make do with the left-overs. And as one student who left an AP school put it, AP “puts some students on pedestals and makes other students feel really bad.” In ICG schools, classes are differentiated based on subject matter, and students make choices based on their intellectual interests.

### **Test-Driven Courses Eliminate Purpose from Learning**

When asked about their motivation for learning, most high school students answer that they “want to go to a good college” or “want to be the best.” Students in test-driven schools do not typically connect learning to their individual interests or passions. They do school work less for its own sake than to show that they can handle “the most rigorous” courses. ICG schools allow students to choose among thematic classes, and then to choose topics within classes that they want to pursue further. Learning about the world merges with learning their interests.

### AERO (Alternative Education Resource Organization)

The Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO) was founded in 1989 by Jerry Mintz. AERO is a branch of the School of Living, a non-profit organization founded in 1934 by Ralph Borsodi. AERO's goal is to advance student-driven, learner-centered approaches to education. AERO is considered by many to be the primary hub of communications and support for educational alternatives around the world. Education Alternatives include, but are not limited to, Montessori, Waldorf (Steiner), Public Choice and At-Risk, Democratic, Homeschool, Open, Charter, Free, Sudbury, Holistic, Virtual, Magnet, Early Childhood, Reggio Emilia, Indigo, Krishnamurti, Quaker, Libertarian, Independent, Progressive, Community, Cooperative, and Unschooling. One of AERO's areas of expertise is democratic process and democratic education, but equally important is the networking of all forms of educational alternatives. It is through AERO's work and mission that they hope to create an education revolution.

For more information, go to: <http://www.educationrevolution.org>

### Big Picture Learning

Big Picture Learning's mission is to lead vital changes in education, both in the United States and internationally, by generating and sustaining innovative, personalized schools that work in tandem with the real world of the greater community.

Big Picture students take responsibility for their own education. They spend considerable time doing real work in the community under the tutelage of volunteer mentors and they are not evaluated solely on the basis of standardized tests. Instead, students are assessed on their performance, on exhibitions and demonstrations of achievement, on motivation, and on the habits of mind, hand, heart, and behavior that they display – reflecting the real world evaluations and assessments that all of us face in our everyday lives.

Big Picture believes that in order to create and influence the schools of the future, we must use the lessons learned through our practice and research to give us added leverage to impact changes in public policy.

For more information, go to: <http://www.bigpicture.org>

### The Coalition of Essential Schools (CES)

The CES Network includes hundreds of schools and more than two-dozen Affiliate Centers. Diverse in size, population, and programmatic emphasis, Essential Schools serve students from pre-kindergarten through high school in urban, suburban, and rural communities, and they are characterized by personalization, democracy and equity, and intellectual vitality and excellence.

For more information, go to <http://www.essentialschools.org>

### IDEA

IDEA, the Institute for Democratic Education in America, is an organization committed to bridging the disconnect between our democratic values and the way we educate and treat young people.

IDEA advances democratic education, or “learning that matters,” which supports self-initiative in learning and is directed toward social justice. IDEA showcases what’s working in education and trains schools and organizations to model these best practices.

For more information, go to <http://www.democraticeducation.org>

**UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA)** convened a group of urban youth to examine youth civic learning in four communities across Los Angeles. The youth explored three questions: **1)** What civic lessons do young people learn in and outside of Los Angeles-area schools? **2)** What does it mean for L.A. youth to participate powerfully in civic life? **3)** How can L.A. youth learn to participate in such ways? The student-researchers traveled to schools, visited community centers and met with community leaders and elected officials. They surveyed youth, analyzed demographic data and reviewed social studies curriculum. The community case studies that emerged from this research speak to the crisis of civic education across Los Angeles schools today. The group found that few youth experience education that enables them to access alternative sources of information, analyze the causes of injustice and develop plans for social change. But these studies also point out that L.A. youth want to make a difference in their schools and communities. They want to learn the skills necessary to speak out and take action and enact democracy. For more information about this project go to: <http://tcla.gseis.ucla.edu/voices/l/features/index.html>

**Speakout Alberta!** was launched by Alberta Canada's Minister of Education on November 26, 2008. The Alberta Student Engagement Initiative encourages youth to share their thoughts about the education system. Speak Out has four components: an interactive, fully moderated website; Speak Out forums where small group-facilitated discussions are held at schools around the province; the Speak Out Annual Student Conference where 200 youth from around the province gather; and the Minister's Student Advisory Council, comprised of 24 youth ages 14-19. For more information go to <http://www.speakout.alberta.ca/>.

**The Institute for Community Research** in Hartford, Connecticut, provides resources and training to help youth become active partners in their schools and communities. These projects help students explore issues ranging from youth violence to educational disparities.

ICR has two participatory action curricula available. One is specific to girls and one is for all youth. The organization has also run participatory action projects specifically for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth. For more information go to <http://www.incommunityresearch.org>

**Sound Out: Student Voice in Schools** promotes student voice in school through research, training and resource-sharing. They provide a systemic approach to whole-school reform emphasizing roles for students as partners in learning and leadership throughout education. SoundOut's activities are based on Adam Fletcher's Frameworks for Meaningful Student Involvement. For more information go to <http://www.soundout.org>

### A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO STUDENT STRESS

“Schools need to look at their own practices. They need to educate teachers, parents and students on the culture of stress.”

– Paul Richards, principal, Needham High,  
Needham, Massachusetts

Paul Richards was the principal of Needham High School in Needham, Massachusetts for five years. During his tenure, he studied and surveyed student stress and tried a variety of measures aimed at reducing it. The father of a kindergartner and first grader, Richards left Needham high at the end of the 2008-2009 school year to become the high school principal at the American School in London.

#### Is stress really a problem for high school students?

Yes. In the twenty years since I was a high school student, the demands on students' time have increased dramatically. The problem is created by the culture. Many parts of school culture in suburban schools are very positive and show definite links to achievement. But there's an underside to it that affects both the physical and mental well-being of our students.

The affects are individualized. For some kids, it can be academic stress – too many AP classes, too much homework, too much competition. For others, it can be the over-scheduling after school – homework competing with piano lessons or sports or community service. For some kids, it's social stress.

At Needham High, we've chosen to focus entirely on academic stress because that's our business. At the same time, we've been very clear that the parents have a big stake in reducing the stress. Many students will say that the primary stress comes from their parents' expectations, namely name-brand colleges, high grades and resumes full of accomplishments and activities.

\* All of the case studies used for this exercise were excerpted from interviews by Sara Bennett, the co-author of *The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It* and the founder of Stop Homework, a not-for-profit project devoted to changing homework policy and practice.

### What is the school's role in creating stress?

Schools need to look at their own practices to see how they contribute to the amount of stress students face. They need to look at the way they use grades, rankings, GPAs and how much homework they assign.

### What kind of steps have you taken to reduce stress?

We stopped publishing the school honor roll in the newspaper a few years ago. We're rewriting our homework policy this year. We've helped students with their schedules. When students sign up for courses, they map out their week, including how many hours they'll be in the classroom, hours of homework, hours on extracurriculars, hours on personal hygiene, etc., to make sure they haven't overloaded themselves.

We've had several parent assemblies, we've spoken to 8th-grade parents and we're going to have a community forum to share techniques.

The students developed a contract that they have their parents sign so the parents won't look at the electronic grade book. Our system allowed parents access to the electronic grade book and some parents were a little too close to it, monitoring their children's progress every day.

We've talked to the parents about why they shouldn't micro-manage, about how it's important for the students to become responsible over the course of the 4 years so when they go to college they can handle it and not be at their parents' doorstep. These days, even graduate students and adult employees are coming back to their parents for help. We need to end that.

We've also been very active in providing stress management techniques. We partnered with the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine, which runs programs in schools wanting to teach kids stress management techniques. Last year, 150 sophomores and juniors took part in their workshops. This year, they worked with the entire sophomore class.

And, our primary goal has been to move towards standards-based learning. That's considered good practice – measuring kids against standards rather than seat time or homework completion. One of the benefits is it deemphasizes grades, and that's a part of the stress equation. Some teachers have started grading with rubrics, which still translates to a bottom-line grade, but deemphasizes the 20 or 30 grades in a term, where every single piece of work counts.

One thing principals can do is determine what our relationship will be with the College Board. Some schools have dumped AP courses so that they can cover material in more depth. Still, we are stuck with state-mandated tests and, as a school, you have a legal and ethical obligation to cover the material that's going to be on the test.

When students feel that their education is authentic, and when they have a good relationship with their teacher, they report feeling less stressed by the work, even if there's a lot of it.

### Any parting thoughts?

The sinking feeling in my gut is that we're producing a generation that can perform very well on what we give them. They can study for a test and regurgitate the material, but the creativity, the individuality, the innovation, continue to be pushed aside. My sinking feeling is we're producing a generation that will have the wrong skill set for what society really needs.

## DEVELOPING CRITICAL AND CREATIVE THINKERS

“Schools tend to be high stress but not intellectually challenging. We need to understand this generation of students and allow learning to be meaningful.”

– Dominic Randolph, head of Riverdale Country School, New York

**Dominic Randolph** is in his second year as Head of Riverdale Country School, an independent K-12 school in New York City. Before that, he was the assistant headmaster at a four-year co-educational boarding school in the Northeast. Randolph's wife is also an educator, and their daughter is a sophomore in college. Randolph's blog, <http://www.dukrabit.org/blog/>, is always fascinating and full of interesting references and ideas.

### What are you thinking about these days?

I'm interested in how we keep schools focused on developing people who are creative and great critical thinkers. You can't be a good thinker if you have to constantly shift from one thing to the next. If a school were to be built around effective thinking, that school and its schedule might look very different from the traditional models we have.

I don't want to damn everything in schools. There are some really good things going on, but external pressures set a lot of policies, whether it's AP exams or the standards movement that pushes the idea that content knowledge indicates intellectual rigor.

I think content is extraordinarily important but making sense of things is not just a matter of learning a lot of facts. Facts have to be connected into ways of knowing within various disciplines. Ways of knowing are skills that are quite difficult for people to learn and use. It takes time and trial and error and failure. High-stakes testing doesn't allow for failure.

Right now, most schools are stuck in a high-stakes, assessment model. Instead of a crazed prepping for summative assessment, we need to talk more about formative assessment, where a student has an opportunity to learn and the stakes are relatively low.

### Do your teachers do formative assessments and how does that work?

There are teachers here who do that. They take notes about the students, their work, the kinds of questions they ask, rather than just assessing them at certain prescribed times of the year and averaging those assessments into a grade. I don't give the

people I work with tests. I work with them in a collaborative way and I give them feedback. I hope not to have an environment where my teachers dread seeing or working with me. And I think that's a much more reasonable way to work with young people as well.

I have a friend who's a great English teacher, who started work-shop writing. It was very challenging, but students loved it. Instead of writing 10 papers in a 10-week trimester, they did two or three. The learning experience was of a much higher quality. What happened was the whole course and the whole development of a student's writing became more of a dialogue between the teacher and student, rather than the more typical: write a paper, get a few comments and go on to the next.

There are a good number of teachers out there, and certainly most of them at Riverdale, who are process-oriented. But sometimes the system or the school doesn't allow for that. It's often the school that's to blame, not the teachers.

And sometimes you have to educate the parents. If someone compares a teacher who has the students complete three really excellent papers to the teacher who has the students complete ten, oftentimes the perception is that the teacher who had the students complete three papers didn't work as hard and that the students didn't learn as much. So there's a perception that needs to be addressed.

### Does your school have Advanced Placement classes?

No. We recently dropped the AP designation because we want our students to have more time to think and be reflective. Sometimes you have to cover so much material for the AP test that there's no time for reflection. I don't necessarily believe that every AP exam is a bad exam to teach to. But some of them really push content coverage over effective thinking.

### Were students coming out of those courses understanding major concepts in disciplines?

At my former school we did an experiment to see whether students understood the major concepts. At the beginning of junior year, we gave the students the same chemistry exam that they'd taken in the spring of their sophomore year. A lot of students couldn't pass the same test in the fall.

That was the only evidence those teachers needed to make them rethink what and how they were teaching. They had to really look at what it was they were teaching, the kinds of principles they wanted the students to learn and consider better ways to do that. This is a very easy thing that all schools could do.

### Do you think student stress is a problem?

Certainly student stress is a huge problem, and I'm still struggling with what drives it. I think if schools used more of an apprenticeship model and students were able to engage in deep ways with local or global communities, then student stress would be diminished. Schoolwork needs to be more relevant. A lot of stress comes from the feeling that life is fragmented, that you're doing something because you have to. But if school is meaningful, if students are passionate about what they're learning, their stress will be reduced.

Recently, I attended 11th grade for three full days as though I were a student. I found the fractured nature very complicated to navigate. There wasn't nearly enough time to reflect on what I was learning. Understanding students' wishes and aspirations and their experiences is key.

## PARENT ACTIVISM: RECESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

“I made a vow that I wouldn’t stop until every kid in the state gets recess.”

– Jodie Leidecker, parent, Berea, Kentucky

**Jodie Leidecker**, a native Kentuckian and a graduate of Berea College, the first interracial and coeducational college in the South, lives in Berea, Kentucky, with her husband and their two children, a 9th grader and her currently home-schooled 10-year-old. She pushed her local elementary school to institute daily recess and is now working on a state-wide initiative to do the same. She is also trying to get her local schools to reduce homework loads.

### How is it that elementary schoolchildren don’t get recess?

In 1990, Kentucky passed the Kentucky Education Reform Act, which put a lot more pressure on teachers to meet test scores. As a way of getting in a little more academics, a lot of schools eliminated recess. My own daughter didn’t get recess regularly in elementary school at all – maybe a discretionary recess here and there – but there was no guarantee. Kentucky isn’t the only state where kids don’t get recess. This is a problem nation-wide.

### How did you decide to challenge this?

I attended school advocacy classes at Forward in the Fifth (Congressional District) – classes set up to train parents to understand school governance and become education advocates. I live in one of the poorest regions in the country and they have these classes to try to increase both parental involvement and the numbers of high school graduates. They give you dinner and a stipend to attend.

There, we learned a lot about our rights, responsibilities and what we could actually influence in our schools.

The recess issue came up over and over again. One day they brought in the research that conclusively shows that kids need recess. So I said, “well, my gosh, at least we can do this. This is something simple.”

### What steps did you take?

I started talking to a lot of other parents about the importance of recess. I made little informational flyers, including when the School Board would meet and who to call, and I tacked them up wherever I went. People began calling the school and talking to their parent representatives on the Site-based Council.

I brought the issue to the Site-based Council, and they told me it was an issue for the School Board. So I went to the School Board and was told it was an issue for the Site-based Council. The lawyer at the School Board quoted pieces of statutes, which I didn't really understand, but then when I went home and read the statutes, I saw it wasn't saying anything I wasn't.

Because parents were very strongly in favor of recess – I got 500 people to sign a petition to the Council, which I also sent to the State Board of Education – the Council finally made the decision that elementary children could have 15 minutes of recess a day. It's not much, but it's something.

After we got recess in our school, I wanted to see every school in Kentucky give their children recess. I started calling legislators, I got my friends around the state to put up flyers which said to call the legislative hotline, I emailed every education professor in the state, every professor at the colleges of health, and anyone else I could think of. Many have been interested and supportive. I finally got my legislator to agree to sponsor a bill, but he hasn't done it yet.

These kinds of bills have been in the House and Senate before, primarily because of obesity. No one's really talking about the importance of free play being crucial to a child's health and development, but they will talk about obesity.

### Were you worried about repercussions for speaking up?

I know there can be repercussions, but my daughter was such a good student and she never got in trouble, so I didn't think it would come up. No one ever got resentful towards her. So that was lucky. I know that can happen.

### Why did you decide to take on the issue of homework as well?

I first came across the issue of homework in an article in *Mothering Magazine*. Then, at the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year, I contacted Sara Bennett at Stop Homework for advice, some resources and some support. Since I'd already been through the recess issue, I started to do the same things. I made

flyers with the fact sheet from *The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It* (Crown, 2006), and passed them out in the car rider lines at both the elementary and middle/high schools. I got a good response from parents. A lot of them told me, "oh, I hate homework; it's horrible for our family," but no one contacted anyone or said anything to the school. So I contacted the school myself. The elementary school principal told me that there was already a homework policy in place and that he would remind the teachers not to exceed the time limits of 20 minutes in grades 1-3 and 20-40 minutes in grades 4-5.

Then I was invited to bring my concerns to the Site-based Council – the same place I'd been with the recess issue. They decided they'd come up with a survey and they developed a fair-minded one, but they decided not to implement it because they said they wouldn't know what to do with the data.

### Any parting words?

Children's voices really get lost. Kids hate homework. Why is that? Kids love to play? Why is that?

Parents are concerned about their kids, but they don't have the resources to take on these issues. I just got an email from a parent who said, "I'm concerned, but I don't have time. I have to help my kids with their homework right now."

## PARENT INFLUENCE ON POLICIES: VOICE ON THE SCHOOL BOARD

“I [was driving] my 6th grade son and his friends. One of his friends said, ‘Homework’s killing me. I’m working 3 hours a night. When are you going to get rid of it?’”

– Mike Falick, School Board Member,  
Spring Branch, Texas

Mike Falick, a lawyer, is a current member and past-president of the Spring Branch Independent School Board of Trustees in Texas. Falick, who grew up in this 32,000-student district in Houston, moved back when he had his own children (now in 9th and 6th grades) so they could go to the same schools he went to. Falick’s wife also grew up in the District. His blog, <http://mikefalick.blogs.com>, was the 2008 weblog awards winner for best education blog.

### Why did you get involved in the School Board?

I wanted to have a meaningful impact on school policy. I had been on a number of parent committees over the years, and I had been president of the PTA council, but I knew the only way I’d have systemic impact was if I became a School Board member. I ran and lost in 2002 and ran again and won in 2004. I ran unopposed and was re-elected in 2007. There are 7 people on the Board.

### What kind of positions do you take?

I’m a school reformer, but I’m not a grenade thrower. I try to bring everyone together. I have focused on homework reform and on making sure that we provide the best educational opportunities to all kids. Our school population is unique. We have kids from both the richest and poorest zip codes in the state. The district as a whole is heterogeneous, but the schools are pretty homogenous. We have serious economic segregation. Some schools can raise \$150,000 at an auction and some can’t raise \$500 at a book fair.

Making sure that all kids get what they need is a challenge. Our Board developed a 5-year goal – to be the premier college-focused district in the state. What it means is that we don’t just focus on the academics – in fact, most schools do provide good academics – but we focus on the emotional and social development of our students as well.

### What is your role in trying to change your District's homework policy?

I know, not only from my personal experience with my own children, but also from talking to other kids and my friends, that we're beating the love of learning out of our kids.

In the summer of 2007, I read *The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It* (Crown, 2006) and it really resonated with me. Shortly after that, I got the District to put together a homework task force to study the issue. No Board members are on the Task Force. It's primarily made up of faculty and staff.

The Task Force read *The Case Against Homework*, *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing* (Da Capo Press, 2006) and *The Battle Over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers and Parents* (Corwin, 2006). They then recommended a policy to the Board that wasn't acceptable to me. Less than a page long, it had very little definition and, in my opinion, was weak. As with all proposals, we had a first reading at one meeting and then, at a later meeting, a second reading where people can make amendments.

I proposed 27 amendments. I took many of my ideas from a Toronto, Canada, policy I'd received from Stop Homework. Toronto is one of the first jurisdictions in North America to pass a substantive homework reform policy.

The Board flipped out at all my amendments, but I wasn't going to give up. Another Board member suggested we reconstitute the Task Force to add parents and community members, which we did. That Task Force met this past fall.

The first reading of their proposed policy was at the end of January 2009. No matter how I feel about the new proposed policy, this is my community and I have to work with it. You might not get everything you want, or even any of you want. You just have to do your best.

### Do you have any advice for other people who might want to run for School Board?

It's a big time commitment, so you have to really be willing to work hard. And, you can't just focus on a single issue. But, if you keep in mind that you're there to serve the kids, you will always make the right decision.

## TEACHER VOICE: CONSIDERING THE RESEARCH ON HOMEWORK

“As a teacher, there’s a tension between what I want to do and what I’m supposed to do. I have to take small steps before I can take big ones. I have to go through the channels, go about it the right way.”

– Anthony, New York City fourth grade teacher

**Anthony** has been teaching for five years at a New York City public school, where he is a fourth-grade teacher. He holds a B.A. in Psychology and a Masters in Childhood Education from New York University. This year, he was accepted into Teachers Network Leadership Institute, a “professional community of teachers and educators working together to improve student achievement.” The Institute advocates for changes in policy and gives teachers an active voice in policy-making decisions. His research project for the Institute is homework in elementary school.

Later this month, he is sitting down with the administration at his school to develop a meaningful homework policy. So far, they have all agreed that the research does not support a policy that focuses on ‘time in each subject’ per night. “We want to lessen the load and create more teacher independence in decision-making regarding homework.”

### Why did you decide to research homework?

I teach in a very diverse school with a wide range of ethnicities and family economic statuses. Most of my students qualify for free lunch. Homework in elementary grades was a no-brainer of a topic for me. I hear so much about homework: stories from my parents of kids up too late, guidelines for how much to give each night from “above,” my “higher achieving” students asking me “why” they have to do homework, the lack of quality of the assignments, the time to check it taking away from my time in preparing better lessons, and mostly to me, how I’m not seeing its positive effects.

### What are your school’s guidelines on homework?

The culture at our school is that homework is expected. Every year, we’re given a breakdown of what we should give in each subject per night.

This year, for the first time, I received a written sheet with the guidelines and seeing it in writing set me off. This is what I’m supposed to give in grade 4: 30-40 minutes of independent reading; 20-30 minutes of math; 20-30 minutes of writing; 10-15 minutes of word study; and either 20 minutes of social studies

or science a night. Even if you add up the minimum times, it totals 100 minutes per night. I've noticed that as the quantity increases, the quality decreases. It looks like kids are trying to finish it and are not engaged in the assignments.

### **Do you follow the rules?**

I'm in a bind. I've spent the last couple of months reading and conducting a literature review to see what the existing research out there has to say. And there's no showing of a correlation between homework and academic achievement. But at the same time, I have to follow the rules and make sure I give homework each night. I have to remain fairly consistent with my grade colleagues. If parents notice that there are different amounts of homework in different classes, then that causes a lot of dissension.

I've told my Assistant Principal that I'm studying homework and he's very open to what I'm doing. He realizes there's little correlation between homework and achievement and he's open to having a conversation about what we're doing and why. He thinks there's importance in having homework to some degree. I agree that reading is important.

### **Do you think your students get anything out of the homework?**

It depends on the assignment. There's some value in getting the parents involved – perhaps doing a little investigation at home. I try to create more assignments that both meet the requirements of our school's policy, as well as add value at home. Assignments that involve students working with their families, communicating and problem solving. But to a certain extent, a lot of the homework is busywork.

I do encourage my students to read for 30 minutes each night and I want them to read something enjoyable. So I let them choose what they're going to read.

### **Do you discipline your students for non-compliance?**

No. Luckily, that's left up to the classroom teacher. I'm not going to stop one of my students from having recess, that's much too important. I have kids who do less than 5 percent of the homework. I talk to them about why. They generally tell me they forgot or they didn't want to do it.

However, as professionals, I think we need to stop placing blame on the students (and their parents) who don't do homework and start looking at why they are not completing the assignments and at the assignments themselves.

### Does homework take away from your teaching?

The one thing that's become clearer to me is how less homework could make an enormous difference to both my students and to me, as a teacher. I don't think many teachers realize how much time homework takes up – collecting it, checking it, passing it out, disciplining students for not completing it. And I don't mean checking it to make sure it's done properly – just to make sure it's done. We don't have time to provide feedback.

Given this new push on data, and given all of the testing, it's a little scary how heavy our duties are. A change in homework policy could help us use our time in so many more effective ways.

Unfortunately, there's this culture right now that "more is better." Give the kids more time to write at home, give them more math to do at home, and they'll get better at it. But we all agree deep down that that's not logical and probably not even beneficial. We need to think more about the quality of our teaching. What could we be doing? How could we be doing it? What's being missed? Where's the breakdown in the learning? That's what we need to focus on.

## PARENT ACTIVISM: CHANGING HOMEWORK POLICY

“I encourage parents to be respectfully vocal.”

– Kerry Dickinson, parent, Danville, California

Kerry Dickinson has a M.A. in Reading and was a part-time teacher in Michigan before she had children. She now lives in Danville, California, with her husband and 10th and 8th grade sons. She is becoming a credentialed California teacher. She and her friend Julie Kurtz helped convince her local school district to rewrite its homework policy.

### What prompted you to try to change the homework policy in your community?

Last year, when my older son started eighth grade, he had a really bad experience with an algebra class, and he started saying he hated middle school. He had always had a great outlook on life and had always loved school, so I felt sad that he was suddenly saying he hated it. I started looking back on his schooling, and I realized that each year he liked it less and less. At the same time, I had a sixth grader who had been struggling since second grade with tests, school and homework. I focused on homework because I was sick of helping them with their projects and feeling like the homework wasn't "turning them on" to school but, in fact, was having the opposite effect.

### What did you do?

I got together with my friend Julie Kurtz, who also has 2 teenage boys and who had faced similar issues about trying to raise well-balanced kids in our fast-paced, high-achieving community. We sent out an email to 10 friends and held an informal meeting at my home.

One of the things that spurred me was *The Homework Myth* by Alfie Kohn. I discovered that Kohn articulated a lot of the feelings I'd been having about education and homework. I shared the book at that meeting, and we started talking about how the problem was multi-dimensional, from homework, to over-scheduling our kids, to the quality of instruction, etc.

We decided that Julie and I would go to the Superintendent's office with our concerns. We were going to focus on the quality and quantity of homework with the hope that the district would re-write its outdated homework policy to better address these issues.

Before we went to the Superintendent's office, we took an informal homework survey of 100 parents. When I tallied it up, parents thought that 50-60 percent of the homework was of high quality, which means that 40-50 percent of it was low quality. We also asked the parents to ask their children to describe homework and most had negative things to say such as "stupid" or "boring." The kids described their best homework as fun projects.

I typed the survey results into a spreadsheet and we took that, along with Kohn's book, some articles I'd found on the internet, information I'd gotten from Sara Bennett at [www.StopHomework.com](http://www.StopHomework.com), and a copy of the District Policy, which had been written in 1995.

We met with the Director of Curriculum Instruction, who was a dad with children of his own and had an appreciation of the problem. We felt like we made an impression because within a week, he got back to us, said that the District agreed that the policy was outdated and invited us to be on a task force to re-write the policy.

I eagerly agreed to participate on the task force made up of a group of 19 parents, teachers and administrators. We met twice a month for about six months and hammered out a revised policy. Sometimes I was frustrated during the meetings, but the upshot is that we have a better policy than we had before which includes a paragraph about the importance of family time that came straight out of Toronto, Canada's new policy.

### Were there things you didn't get in the policy?

I really wanted an opt-out option, which Sara Bennett recommended to me, and I also wanted a clause that children wouldn't face punitive measures, such as being kept in from recess, if they didn't turn in homework.

### Were you worried about repercussions for speaking up?

It's been kind of an emotional roller coaster. Some days I'll hear positive things from parents about how grateful they are for the new policy. But then sometimes I feel somewhat like an outcast at my kids' schools. It's worth it though, so I encourage parents to be respectfully vocal at their schools.

### What are you doing now that you have a new policy in your community?

I send out a weekly email that started with 10 friends and now it's up to 200 people. I write about these issues, send out articles that I think are interesting and try to encourage parents to email their concerns to the teachers.

Whenever I have concerns about something at either of my sons' schools, I email the teachers or principals. In the fall, my son's school instituted a Zeros Aren't Permitted policy, which required students to finish incomplete homework during lunchtime. I wrote a detailed email to the principal about why this was such a bad idea, and the program was turned into a voluntary program.

I also asked the district to change the homepage on its scheduling website so that students wouldn't see their grades as soon as they log on. It may seem minor, but it helps the students and parents to be less focused on grades.

I've also become an advisor to the film *Race to Nowhere*. I've helped to bring the film to our district, and I keep on thinking about, reading about and talking about these issues with friends and teachers.

In my own home, I almost never say the *H* word anymore. I do not require my kids to come home and do homework. I encourage them to go out and run around or chill out. I almost never help them with homework. If they ask, I'll help, but I don't hyper-parent their homework and tests like I used to.

I've encouraged my older son not to add an extra class into his high school schedule. I think an extra hour of sleep is more important.

And, I moved my laptop out of the kitchen and into our home office. I didn't want to model working 24/7 and not give my kids my full attention when they were talking to me.

## FOUNDING AN INNOVATIVE SCHOOL

Alan Shusterman lives in Chevy Chase, Maryland with his wife and three children. He is the founder of School for Tomorrow (SFT), an independent non-profit secondary school (grades 6-12) located in Rockville, Maryland, which opened fall 2009.

### Can you tell me a little bit about your background and why you decided to start a school?

I was a public school kid, always a good student but never particularly engaged in school. I was able to get A's despite myself. Because I was a good student, I ended up at the University of Pennsylvania. Becoming a teacher was never on the horizon. Back then, before Teach for America, it wasn't culturally acceptable for someone graduating from an Ivy League school to go into teaching. So, instead, I went to Harvard Law School.

With my law degree I got a well paying job in a big law firm – and I was miserable and unfulfilled. The big turning point came 8 years ago, when I was trying to decide what to do next. One day my father began a conversation with, “Alan, you’ve always wanted to teach.” And then he and my mother offered me this incredible opportunity to make the transition into teaching, with financial support from them; without that, I’d never have been able to do it, for at that point my wife and I had three young kids to support.

I was fortunate to get a job at Sandy Spring Friends School [in Montgomery County, Maryland], a well-respected Quaker private school, teaching U.S. history to 7th and 8th graders. I had never taught a day in my life, and I had never taken an education class. But very quickly I figured out that I loved teaching, and that I had at last found my calling. Almost as quickly, however, I figured out that there’s something very wrong with secondary schools as they exist today.

Secondary schools are completely disconnected from the real world. It’s as if they are in a parallel universe. This results in outdated curriculum that doesn’t make sense for the world our high school graduates will be entering, and a learning environment that doesn’t take advantage of all that today’s world has to offer. For example, most schools today, whether public or private, will proudly show you their wonderful state-of-the-art computer labs, or mobile carts. Yet, in the real world, computers aren’t relegated to a special room or occasion, but are integrated into everyday life. And then there are the computer or technology classes where what is taught has already been learned by the students, on their own, years before.

This leads me to the second, even more profound disconnect: between schools, many of the adults in schools, and students. Schools relate to and treat these complex, evolving individuals, the students, in unreal, artificial ways – expecting them to do things that simply don't make sense, yet not expecting them to do other things they are fully capable of; and regularly placing them in restrictive, suffocating “boxes.”

So, I decided, within the first few months of teaching at Sandy Spring, that someday I would start my own school. A few years later, I left teaching. I home schooled my 4th grader for a year – because her 3rd grade year in school had been so debilitating – and I began full-fledged planning to start my own school. And, after working full-time the next two years to get it off the ground, School for Tomorrow at last opened in September 2009.

### Tell me about School for Tomorrow (SFT). What makes it unique?

Everything we do here at SFT can be traced back to two core questions. First, what does a high school graduate need to know and be able to do in order to thrive in college, the workplace and life in the decades ahead? Second, what are the most effective and efficient ways for students, in general, and each student in particular, to master the learning outcomes resulting from the answer to the first question? The good news is that the answers are already out there – in work done by others within the education world and outside the education world. For instance, over the past decade at least three or four well-funded, compelling studies have been completed that address the first question.

### Do you have a curriculum?

Yes, there are three main areas of curriculum, in the sense of required learning outcomes, that result from asking our first core question.

- First, reading, writing, and arithmetic still matter. Or, put another way, all students must master what we call the transferable academic skills of learning – that is, how to ask the right questions, problem solve, find information and understand it in whatever form they find it, analyze information, use it, and be able to communicate in writing, orally and with the assistance of multi-media tools. In addition, the research shows that there's a certain level of quantitative reasoning and mathematics that is beneficial for all students to master.
- Second, we have a core knowledge component. That's the basic foundational knowledge that someone needs so they can then apply their generic learning

skills if they want or need to learn more about a given subject. For example, at SFT our U.S. history requirement isn't a one-year course that covers all you can cram into a textbook and 150, 45-minute class periods. Instead, it's a pared down mix of key concepts, storylines, and facts that might take a student, say, 20 hours to learn. Through this core knowledge approach, we enable our students to more effectively understand and retain important background information and concepts, while covering many more subjects than in regular schools.

- Third is what we refer to as our right brain curriculum – that is, at SFT drama, music, art, emotional intelligence, character, collaboration, conflict resolution, physical fitness and mind-body work are treated as seriously as traditional academic subjects. In the 21st century, from a purely economic, earning potential point of view, let alone other reasons, all students must be given the opportunity to develop their right brain, as well as their left brain, skills and abilities.

And, on top of this well-rounded education, every SFT student will have time to pursue the area she's most passionate about to the "nth" degree. For example, we will arrange internships for our students, and we will bring real world experts into the school. Kids are capable of doing amazing things before they're 18, if given the opportunity. We will break through the ceiling that holds kids down in other schools.

### Do you have *bottom-line* requirements?

Our students will have to meet specific graduate requirements that fall under each of the three main areas of curriculum that I told you about; where student choice and individualization come into play is with respect to how the learning will take place. For instance, all SFT students are required to master Algebra and Geometry; but how they do it, and when they do, will naturally vary greatly among them.

### How does this work?

First and foremost, we recognize that every student is different, and that the same student is different depending on the week, the month and the year. So, every single student must have his own individualized learning path that allows him to learn at the pace that makes sense for him in the ways that make sense for him. And, given all the resources and knowledge that we have to assist learning in today's world, this absolutely can be done.

Second, more often than not, you'll see interdisciplinary learning at SFT, which is much more meaningful and efficient than the automatic division of the school experience into individualized subjects. Also, you'll see multi-age groupings of students. For instance, if we have a 14-, a 12-, and a 10-year-old who are each ready to learn calculus, then there's no reason they can't learn it together; on the other hand, if they haven't yet mastered pre-algebra, then we don't push them into algebra until they're ready. Moreover, multi-age groupings help to facilitate something we continually promote at SFT – kids teaching and learning from each other. Kids tend to accept help from each other more readily than from adults and, perhaps more significantly, teaching others is the best way to consolidate and solidify your own learning.

### How else are you different from most schools?

Research shows, and anyone with common sense knows, that kids learn best when they've had a decent night's sleep and are well-fed and well-hydrated. So, SFT starts at 9:30. We have healthy snacks available throughout the day so our students can eat when they're hungry, and we have water coolers in our classrooms so they can get drinks when they're thirsty. And our students are allowed to get up to stretch, to move around, and to go outside when they get antsy.

The general rule at SFT is we don't care what your learning looks like – for example, you can chew gum in class or listen to an iPod when working independently – as long as you're making sufficient progress in your work and you're not disturbing anyone else.

### What's your homework policy?

We have what we refer to as a *sensible homework policy*. The only mandatory homework is ½ hour of reading a night – reading of the student's own choosing. Beyond that, there is no built-in daily homework at SFT. To be clear, our students will, on occasion, do school-related work at home. But the rule is that, before doing any school-related work at home, you should know why you're doing it and what you're supposed to be doing; if you don't, then you should stop, not waste your time and energy, and check with a teacher the next day.

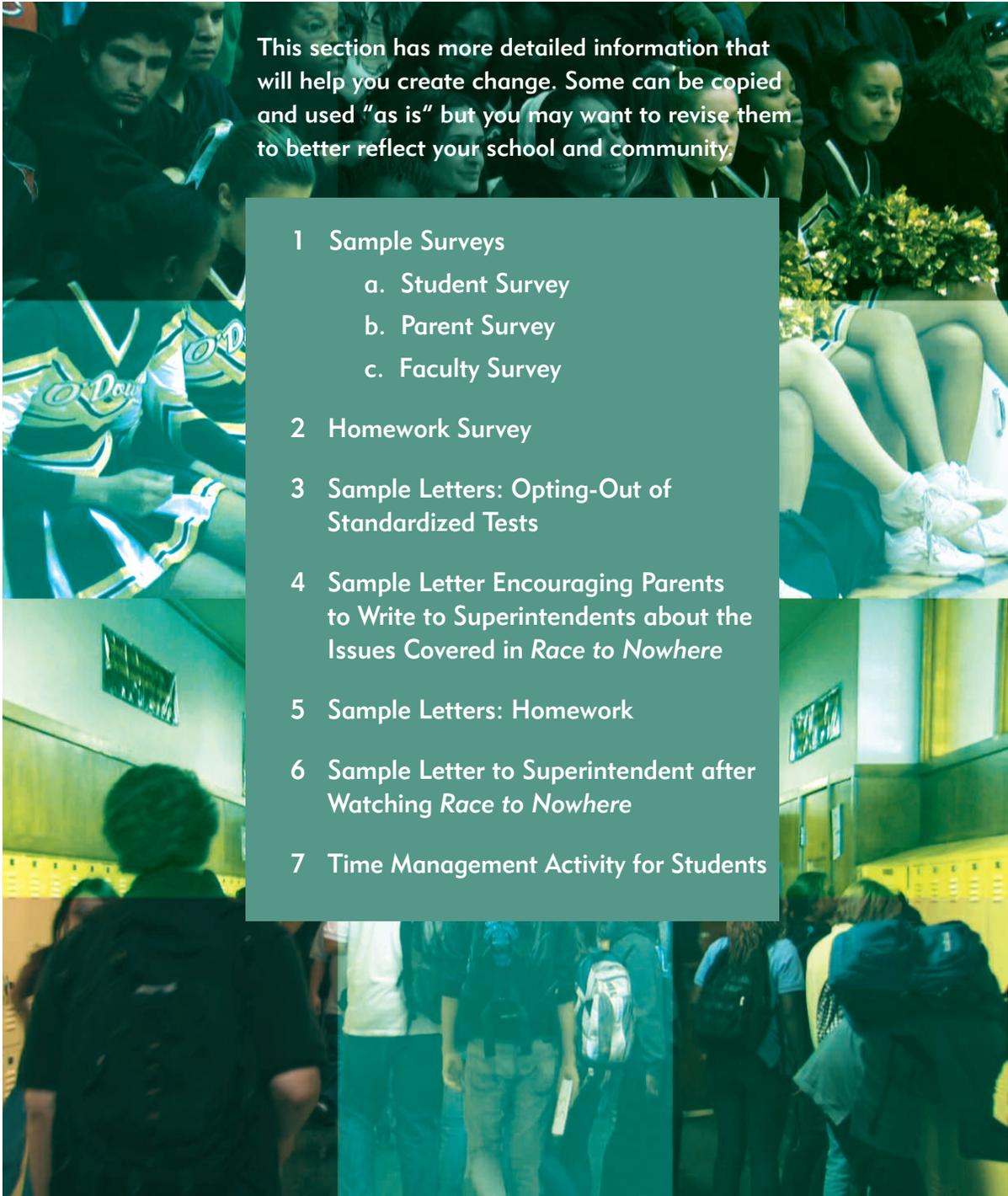
## END NOTES: PART FIVE

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## PART SIX: SURVEYS AND SAMPLE LETTERS

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This section has more detailed information that will help you create change. Some can be copied and used “as is” but you may want to revise them to better reflect your school and community.

- 1 Sample Surveys
  - a. Student Survey
  - b. Parent Survey
  - c. Faculty Survey
- 2 Homework Survey
- 3 Sample Letters: Opting-Out of Standardized Tests
- 4 Sample Letter Encouraging Parents to Write to Superintendents about the Issues Covered in *Race to Nowhere*
- 5 Sample Letters: Homework
- 6 Sample Letter to Superintendent after Watching *Race to Nowhere*
- 7 Time Management Activity for Students

## 6.1

### SAMPLE SURVEYS

As part of its efforts to reduce pressure and stress on students and staff, Needham High School in Needham, MA sent out the following surveys to students, staff and parents/guardians. Some of the results from the surveys were publicized in the wider school community and were a starting point for dialogue and change.

Before conducting a survey, it is important to establish a framework for how the data collected will be used.

**Dear Students,**

We all experience stress at one time or another, and not all stress is bad. Some stress comes from within and other stress is externally caused. We would like to get feedback on this issue as it relates to your high school experiences. The results of the survey will help us with policy and program development aimed at \_\_\_\_\_.

This survey is completely anonymous, so please answer the questions as accurately as you can. Thank you in advance for your thoughtful responses.

## SECTION A

Please answer the following questions by circling your responses.

- A1.** Are you male or female?
- a. Male
  - b. Female
- A2.** What is your grade level?
- a. 9th grade
  - b. 10th grade
  - c. 11th grade
  - d. 12th grade
- A3.** On average, how many hours do you sleep each weeknight?
- a. Less than 3 hours
  - b. 3 to 4 hours
  - c. 5 to 6 hours
  - d. 7 to 8 hours
  - e. More than 8 hours
- A4.** Do you think that you get enough sleep? Please answer using a 5-point scale where '1' means "Not Enough Sleep" and '5' means "More than Enough Sleep."
- | Not Enough Sleep |          |          | More Than Enough Sleep |          |
|------------------|----------|----------|------------------------|----------|
| <b>1</b>         | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b>               | <b>5</b> |
| (a)              | (b)      | (c)      | (d)                    | (e)      |

## SECTION B

The questions in this section address your academic experiences. Please circle your responses.

**B1.** Which of the following best describes your grades?

- a. Mostly A's
- b. Mostly A's and B's
- c. Mostly B's and C's
- d. Mostly D's or below

**B2.** How important are your grades to you personally?

Please answer using a 5-point scale where '1' means "Not At All Important" and '5' means "Very Important."

Not At All Important

Very Important

- |          |          |          |          |          |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | <b>5</b> |
| (a)      | (b)      | (c)      | (d)      | (e)      |

**B3.** What grades do you expect of yourself?

- a. Mostly A's
- b. Mostly A's and B's
- c. Mostly B's and C's
- d. Mostly D's or below

**B4.** How important is it to you that you do well compared to others in your school? Please answer using a 5-point scale where '1' means "Not At All Important" and '5' means "Very Important."

Not At All Important

Very Important

- |          |          |          |          |          |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | <b>5</b> |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|

**B5.** How important do you think your grades are to your parents/guardians?

Please answer using a 5-point scale where '1' means "Not At All Important" and '5' means "Very Important."

Not At All Important

Very Important

- |          |          |          |          |          |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | <b>5</b> |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|

**B6.** What grades do you think your parents/guardians expect you to get?

- a. Mostly A's
- b. Mostly A's and B's
- c. Mostly B's and C's
- d. Mostly D's or below

**B7.** How important is it to your parents/guardians that you do well compared to others in your school? Please answer using a 5-point scale where '1' means "Not At All Important" and '5' means "Very Important."

Not At All Important					Very Important
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	

**B8.** How many of each of the following classes are you currently taking?

- |                                       |   |   |   |           |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|---|-----------|
| a. AP                                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 or more |
| b. Accelerated                        | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 or more |
| c. Honors                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 or more |
| d. Standard                           | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 or more |
| e. PLC (personalized learning center) |   |   |   |           |
|                                       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 or more |
| f. Skills Center                      | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 or more |

**B9.** On average, how much time (total) do you spend on homework/studying nightly?

- a. I don't study/do homework
- b. 1 hour or less
- c. 1 to 2 hours
- d. 2 to 3 hours
- e. 3 to 4 hours
- f. More than 4 hours

**B10.** When studying for a test, how frequently do you study as much as you feel is necessary to do your best? Please answer using a 5-point scale where '1' means "Never" and '5' means "All the Time."

Never					All the Time
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	

**B11.** In answering this question, please think of a typical night in which you do homework/study. *While you are doing your homework or studying*, how frequently do you communicate with your friends (using IM, your cell phone, email, etc)? Please answer using a 5-point scale where '1' means "Not at All" and '5' means "All the Time."

Not At All					All the Time
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	

**B12.** To what degree do you take advantage of the following people and resources to help you with homework, studying for tests, school-related projects, etc. Please use a 5-point scale where “1” means that you use each resource “Never” and “5” means that you use each resource “All the Time.”

	Never				All the Time
a. Parents/guardians	1	2	3	4	5
b. Other family members (brothers, sisters, grandparents, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
c. Friends	1	2	3	4	5
d. Teachers	1	2	3	4	5
e. Guidance Counselors	1	2	3	4	5
f. Librarians/ Media Specialists	1	2	3	4	5
g. Private Tutors	1	2	3	4	5
h. Skills or PLC teachers	1	2	3	4	5
i. Other (specify)	1	2	3	4	5

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**The next group of questions focuses on your extracurricular activities.**

**Again, please circle your responses.**

**B13.** Please identify all extracurricular activities in which you currently participate.

- a. Band, orchestra, chorus, a cappella, etc.
- b. Community Service
- c. Dance
- d. Debate Team
- e. Drama / Theatre
- f. Foreign Language Club (e.g., Spanish Club)
- g. Math Club
- h. National Honor Society
- i. Non-school sponsored sports (e.g., martial arts, basketball)
- j. School Publications (e.g., yearbook, newspaper, literary magazine)
- k. School-sponsored sports (e.g., football, basketball)
- l. Student Council
- m. Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**B14.** During a typical week, how many total hours do you spend doing the activities listed above?

\_\_\_\_\_ hours

**B15.** Please identify the top 3 reasons you participate in the activity/activities listed above.

- a. For fun
- b. To improve my chances of getting into a good college
- c. Because my parents want me to
- d. Because my friends participate
- e. To learn new things/because I'm interested
- f. To challenge myself
- g. Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**B16.** Is your participation in extracurricular activities driven mostly by you, your parents, or someone else?

- a. The decision is mostly driven by me
  - b. The decision is mostly driven by my parents
  - c. The decision is mostly driven by someone else (specify who)
- \_\_\_\_\_

**The next question asks about any jobs you may have after school or on weekends.**

**"Job" can include part-time work, like babysitting, working in a store or restaurant, etc.**

**B17.** On average, how many hours do you work each week during the academic year?

- a. Less than 4 hours
- b. 5 to 8 hours
- c. 9 to 12 hours
- d. More than 13 hours

**The next two questions ask about time you spend with your family.**

**B18.** Think back over the past week. How many hours did you spend doing things with your family? This could include eating meals together, watching TV together, discussing homework and doing other similar activities.

\_\_\_\_\_ hours

**B19.** Over the past week, how often did you do each of the following with your family?

	Not at All	Not Often	Often	Very Often
a. Ate a meal together	1	2	3	4
b. Watched TV	1	2	3	4
c. Played a video / board game	1	2	3	4
d. Discussed homework or other academic topics	1	2	3	4
e. Attended a movie, concert, or sporting event	1	2	3	4
f. Ran errands	1	2	3	4
g. Took a trip out-of-town	1	2	3	4
h. Shopped	1	2	3	4
i. Exercised	1	2	3	4
j. Hung out	1	2	3	4
k. Other (specify)	1	2	3	4

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The next two questions ask about time you spend with friends doing activities not related to school, extracurricular activities or family.

**B20.** Think back over the past week. How many hours did you spend with your friends doing things *not related to school, extracurricular activities, or family*?

\_\_\_\_\_ hours

**B21.** Over the past week, how often did you do each of the following with your friends?

	Not at All	Not Often	Often	Very Often
a. Exercised	1	2	3	4
b. Ate a meal together	1	2	3	4
c. Watched TV	1	2	3	4
d. Played a video / board game	1	2	3	4
e. Attended a movie, concert, or sporting event	1	2	3	4
f. Shopped	1	2	3	4
g. Hung Out	1	2	3	4
h. Other (specify)	1	2	3	4

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## SECTION C

The following questions all ask about “stress.” By “stress” we mean physical or emotional strain caused by certain situations that are present in your life.

**C1.** Please rate the degree to which you perceive stress to be a problem in your life. Please answer using a 5-point scale where ‘1’ means “Not A Problem At All” and ‘5’ means “A Severe Problem.”

Not A Problem At All					A Severe Problem
1	2	3	4	5	

**C2.** In answering the following question, please think about a typical week and the degree to which you experience different types of stress. Please use a 5-point scale where “1” means that you experience “No Stress At All” and “5” means that you experience “An Extreme Amount of Stress.”

	1	2	3	4	5
	No Stress At All			An Extreme Amount Of Stress	
a. Academic Stress (school work)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Social Stress	1	2	3	4	5
c. Stress Associated with Extracurricular Activities (sports, clubs, music, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
d. Job Stress	1	2	3	4	5

**C3.** Think back over the past month. Please circle the top three sources of stress in your life.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Schoolwork</li> <li>b. Relationships with friends</li> <li>c. Relationships with family</li> <li>d. School sports</li> <li>e. Non-school sports</li> <li>f. Extracurricular (non-sport) activities</li> <li>g. Parental expectations</li> <li>h. My own expectations</li> <li>i. Getting into college</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>j. Drugs/Alcohol</li> <li>k. Family obligations</li> <li>l. My job</li> <li>m. Financial issues</li> <li>n. Religion</li> <li>o. Sexual orientation</li> <li>p. Race / ethnicity</li> <li>q. Other (specify)</li> </ul> <hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-top: 10px;"/> |
|--|--|

**C4.** For each statement below, please indicate the frequency with which you experience these feelings using a 5-point scale where “1” means that you “Never” experience it and “5” means that you experience it “Always.”

	Never					Always				
a. I feel overwhelmed by my schoolwork.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
b. I feel overwhelmed by my extracurricular activities.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
c. I feel overwhelmed by my friends' expectations.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
d. I feel overwhelmed by my own expectations.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
e. I feel overwhelmed by my parents' expectations.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
f. I feel overwhelmed by my teachers' expectations.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
g. I feel like I can control the stress in my life.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
h. My friends place pressure on me to do well in school.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
i. My friends place pressure on me to do poorly in school.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
j. I cope well with the demands of school.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
k. My parents help me control the stress in my life.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
l. My teachers help me control the stress in my life.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

**C5.** The following statements address the various ways people manage their stress. For each statement, please indicate the frequency with which you engage in each behavior, using a 5-point scale where “1” means that you “Never” manage your stress this way and “5” means that you “Always” manage your stress this way.

	Never					Always				
a. I exercise to manage my stress.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
b. I use drugs and/or alcohol to manage my stress.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
c. I talk to a trusted friend/relative to manage my stress.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
d. I make time to be alone to manage my stress.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
e. I listen to music to manage my stress.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
f. I engage in activities I enjoy to manage my stress.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

**C6.** Please rate the degree to which you agree with the following statements. Please use a 5-point scale where “1” means that you “Strongly Disagree” and “5” means that you “Strongly Agree.”

	Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree				
a. There are adults in school who care about me.	1	2	3	4	5					
b. I have at least one close friend that I can talk to.	1	2	3	4	5					
c. My friends are concerned about my level of stress.	1	2	3	4	5					
d. My teachers are concerned about my level of stress.	1	2	3	4	5					
e. My parents are concerned about my level of stress.	1	2	3	4	5					
f. I am concerned about my level of stress.	1	2	3	4	5					

**C7.** Who are you most likely to go to first for support when experiencing stress? Please rank order up to your top 3, with “1” being the person you would go to first.

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. Parent
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. Teacher
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. Friend
- \_\_\_\_\_ d. Guidance or Personal Counselor
- \_\_\_\_\_ e. Coach
- \_\_\_\_\_ f. Sibling
- \_\_\_\_\_ g. School Nurse
- \_\_\_\_\_ h. Other Adult
- \_\_\_\_\_ i. No one
- \_\_\_\_\_ j. Other (Specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**C8.** Think back over the past month. Please rank order which three activities have been most effective in reducing your stress. Place a ‘1’ next to the most effective stress reducing activity, etc.

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. Engaging in physical activity (sports, exercise, etc.)
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. Engaging in relaxation activities (meditation, yoga, etc.)
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. Spending time engaging in leisure activities I enjoy (e.g., reading a book, listening to music, playing video games)
- \_\_\_\_\_ d. Talking to my parents about my stress
- \_\_\_\_\_ e. Talking to friends about my stress
- \_\_\_\_\_ f. Talking to other adults about my stress (e.g., teachers, guidance counselors)

*continues on following page*

- \_\_\_\_\_ g. Getting assistance with school work
- \_\_\_\_\_ h. Eating a nutritious diet
- \_\_\_\_\_ i. Sleeping
- \_\_\_\_\_ j. Spending time alone
- \_\_\_\_\_ k. Other (Specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**C9.** Which of the following are the most effective ways your **parents** help reduce the level of stress in your life? Circle the two that are most effective.

- a. Help you with your homework
- b. Provide emotional support
- c. Do fun things with you
- d. Talk with you about your friends and difficult social situations
- e. Help you prioritize and organize
- f. Contact your teacher/coach etc. for you
- g. Give you space when you need it
- h. Other (Specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**C10.** Which of the following are the most effective ways your **teachers and guidance/personal counselors** help reduce the level of stress in your life? Circle the two that are most effective.

- a. Help you with your homework
- b. Provide emotional support when you feel sad, angry or frustrated
- c. Help you problem solve and address the causes of your stress
- d. Help you organize your workload (e.g., help you prioritize)
- e. Lighten your workload or extend the due date of assignments in their courses
- f. Contact your teacher/coach/parents etc. for you
- g. Other (Specify) \_\_\_\_\_

## SECTION D

For 11th and 12th graders only

**D1.** We are interested in the most important factors that you will consider/considered in selecting a college to attend. Please identify the top five factors listed below that you will consider/considered and then rank order these factors from 1 to 5. Place a '1' next to the factor that is/was your most important consideration. Place a '2' next to the next most important consideration, etc.

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. Name recognition
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. Overall academic reputation of the college
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. Reputation of the college in your academic field of interest
- \_\_\_\_\_ d. Overall quality and reputation of the college's sports teams
- \_\_\_\_\_ e. Quality and reputation of the sports teams in which you participate
- \_\_\_\_\_ f. Whether the college is close to home
- \_\_\_\_\_ g. Whether the college is located in an urban or rural area
- \_\_\_\_\_ h. The size of the college
- \_\_\_\_\_ i. The religious orientation of the college
- \_\_\_\_\_ j. Opportunities to get involved
- \_\_\_\_\_ k. Where your friends are attending college
- \_\_\_\_\_ l. Affordability
- \_\_\_\_\_ m. The college's culture
- \_\_\_\_\_ n. Ability to play sports
- \_\_\_\_\_ o. Whether it's a good fit for you
- \_\_\_\_\_ p. Other (Specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ q. Other (Specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**D2.** To what extent are you satisfied with the following:

	Not Satisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
a. Your <i>academic</i> high school experience so far	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
b. Your <i>non-academic / extracurricular</i> high school experience so far	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
c. Your <i>social</i> experience in high school so far	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>

## Dear Parents,

We all experience stress at one time or another, and not all stress is bad. Some stress comes from within and other stress is externally caused. We would like to get feedback on this issue as it relates to your perceptions and observations of your children as students. The results of the survey will help us with policy and program development aimed at \_\_\_\_\_

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If you are a parent with more than one child, please consider your oldest child who is currently enrolled when answering the questions on the survey.

While you are completing the survey, please do not discuss your responses with your child(ren). Also, keep in mind that this survey is completely anonymous, so please answer the questions as accurately as you can. Thank you in advance for your thoughtful responses.

## SECTION A

The questions in this section request basic demographic and sleep information. Please answer the questions by circling your responses.

**A1.** Please indicate your relationship to your child.

- a. Mother
- b. Father
- c. Guardian
- d. Other

**A2.** Is your child male or female?

- a. Male
- b. Female

**A3.** Please indicate your child's grade level:

- a. 9th grade
- b. 10th grade
- c. 11th grade
- d. 12th grade

**A4.** On average, how many hours does your child sleep each weeknight?

- a. Less than 3 hours
- b. 3 to 4 hours
- c. 5 to 6 hours
- d. 7 to 8 hours
- e. More than 8 hours

**A5.** Do you think your child gets enough sleep? Please answer using a 5-point scale where '1' means "Not Enough Sleep" and '5' means "More Than Enough Sleep."

Not Enough Sleep

More Than Enough Sleep

- |          |          |          |          |          |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | <b>5</b> |
| (a)      | (b)      | (c)      | (d)      | (e)      |

## SECTION B

The questions in this section address your child's academic experiences. Please circle your responses.

**B1.** Which of the following best describes your child's grades?

- a. Mostly A's
- b. Mostly A's and B's
- c. Mostly B's and C's
- d. Mostly D's or below

**B2.** How important are your child's grades to you personally? Please answer using a 5-point scale where '1' means "Not At All Important" and '5' means "Very Important."

Not At All Important

Very Important

- |          |          |          |          |          |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | <b>5</b> |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|

**B3.** What grades do you expect your child to get?

- a. Mostly A's
- b. Mostly A's and B's
- c. Mostly B's and C's
- d. Mostly D's or below

**B4.** How important is it to you that your child performs well academically compared to his/her classmates?

Not At All Important Very Important  
1 2 3 4 5

**B5.** How important do you think your child's grades are to your child?  
Please answer using a 5-point scale where '1' means "Not At All Important" and '5' means "Very Important."

Not At All Important Very Important  
1 2 3 4 5

**B6.** What grades do you think your child expects him/herself to receive?

- a. Mostly A's
- b. Mostly A's and B's
- c. Mostly B's and C's
- d. Mostly D's or below

**B7.** How important do you think it is to your child that he/she performs well academically compared to his/her classmates?

Not At All Important Very Important  
1 2 3 4 5

**B8.** On average, how much time does your child spend on schoolwork/studying for all classes combined each night?

- a. He/she doesn't study
- b. 1 hour or less
- c. 1 to 2 hours
- d. 2 to 3 hours
- e. 3 to 4 hours
- f. More than 4 hours
- g. Not Sure



The next two questions ask about time you spend as a family.

**B13.** Over the past week, how often did you do each of the following with your family?

	Not at All	Not Often	Often	Very Often
a. Ate a meal together	1	2	3	4
b. Watched TV	1	2	3	4
c. Played a video / board game	1	2	3	4
d. Discussed homework or other academic topics	1	2	3	4
e. Attended a movie, concert, or sporting event	1	2	3	4
f. Ran errands	1	2	3	4
g. Took a trip out-of-town	1	2	3	4
h. Shopped	1	2	3	4
i. Exercised	1	2	3	4
j. Hung out	1	2	3	4
k. Other (specify)	1	2	3	4

\_\_\_\_\_

**B14.** Think back over the past week. How many hours did you spend doing things with your family? “Things” could include eating meals together, watching TV together, discussing homework, etc.

\_\_\_\_\_ hours

## SECTION C

The following questions all ask about “stress.” By “stress” we mean physical or emotional strain caused by certain situations that are present in one’s life.

**C1.** Please rate the degree to which you perceive stress to be a problem in your child’s life. Please answer using a 5-point scale where ‘1’ means “Not A Problem At All” and ‘5’ means “A Severe Problem.”

Not A Problem At All				A Severe Problem
1	2	3	4	5

**C2.** In answering the following question, please think about a **typical week** and the degree to which you think that your child experiences the following types of stress.

Please use a 5-point scale where “**1**” means that he/she experiences “No Stress At All” and “**5**” means that he/she experiences “As Much As He/She Has Ever Had.”

	No Stress At All			As Much As He/She Has Ever Had	
a. Academic Stress (school work)	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
b. Social Stress	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
c. Stress Associated with Extracurricular Activities	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
d. Job Stress	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

**C3.** Think back over the past month. Please circle what you perceive to be the top three sources of stress in your child’s life.

- a. Academics
- b. Relationships with friends
- c. Relationships with family
- d. School sports
- e. Non-school sports
- f. Extracurricular (non-sport) activities
- g. Parental expectations
- h. Child’s own expectations
- i. Getting into college
- j. Drugs/Alcohol
- k. Family obligations
- l. Child’s job
- m. Financial issues
- n. Religion
- o. Sexual orientation
- p. Race / ethnicity
- q. Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_



**C7.** Which of the following are the most effective ways **you** help reduce the level of stress in **your child's** life? Circle the **two** that are most effective.

- a. Help with his/her homework
- b. Provide emotional support
- c. Do fun things with him/her
- d. Talk with him/her about friends and difficult social situations
- e. Help him/her prioritize and organize
- f. Contact teacher/coach etc. for him/her
- g. Give space when he/she needs it
- h. Other (Specify)

## SECTION D

**For Parents of Children in 11th and 12th grades only**

**D1.** We are interested in the most important factors that your child will consider/considered in selecting a college to attend. Please identify the top five factors listed below that you (as the parent) believe your child should consider/considered and then rank order these factors from 1 to 5. Place a '1' next to the factor that is/was the most important consideration. Place a '2' next to the next most important consideration, etc.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| _____ a. Name recognition  | _____ h. The size of the college                  |
| _____ b. Overall academic reputation of the college                                  | _____ i. The religious orientation of the college |
| _____ c. Reputation of the college in your child's academic field of interest        | _____ j. Opportunities to get involved            |
| _____ d. Overall quality and reputation of the college's sports teams                | _____ k. Where friends are attending college      |
| _____ e. Quality and reputation of the sports teams in which your child participates | _____ l. Affordability                            |
| _____ f. Whether the college is close to home  | _____ m. The college's culture                    |
| _____ g. Whether the college is located in an urban or rural area                    | _____ n. Whether it's a good fit for my child     |
|  | _____ o. Other (Specify) _____                    |
|  | _____ p. Other (Specify) _____                    |

**D2.** To what extent are you satisfied with the following:

	Not Satisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
a. Your child's <i>academic</i> high school experience so far	1	2	3	4
b. Your child's <i>non-academic/ extracurricular</i> high school experience so far	1	2	3	4
c. Your child's <i>social</i> experience in high school so far	1	2	3	4

**Dear Faculty,**

Stress is a part of teaching as it is a part of life. We all experience it at one time or another, and not all stress is bad. Some stress comes from within and other stress is externally caused. We would like to get feedback on this issue as it relates to your perceptions and observations of your own stress as well as your students' stress. The results of the survey will help us with policy and program development aimed at improving our community's \_\_\_\_\_

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This survey is completely anonymous, so please answer the questions as accurately as you can. Thank you in advance for your thoughtful responses.

**SECTION A**

**The questions in this section request basic demographic and sleep information. Please answer the questions by circling your responses.**

**A1.** Please indicate how long you have been a teacher.

- a. 0-3 years
- b. 4-9 years
- c. 10+ years

**A2.** Are you male or female?

- a. Male
- b. Female

**A3.** Please indicate the area in which you teach:

- a. English
- b. Social Studies
- c. Math
- d. Science
- e. World Language
- f. Special Education
- g. Specialties (art, music, media, etc.)
- h. Health/Physical Education
- i. Guidance

**A4.** Please indicate which grade level(s) you teach/support. Circle all that apply.

- a. 9th grade
- b. 10th grade
- c. 11th grade
- d. 12th grade
- e. All grades

**A5.** Please indicate which academic levels you teach/support.

- a. Standard
- b. Honors
- c. Accelerated
- d. Advanced Placement
- e. N/A

## SECTION B

The next set of questions focuses on your role(s) at school, your workload, and the stress you experience related to your job. By “stress” we mean physical or emotional strain caused by certain situations that are present in your life.

**B1.** Please indicate the average number of hours you work each week preparing for class and/or fulfilling other teaching responsibilities (planning, correcting, etc.) – but not including actual classroom teaching time.

- a. 10-20 hours
- b. 21-29 hours
- c. 30+ hours

**B2.** Please identify the non-teaching or counseling-related responsibilities you are engaged in at school.

- a. Coaching
- b. Committee Work
- c. Club/Class Advising
- d. Mentoring (students and/or teachers)

**B3.** Please indicate how much time you spend per week on non-teaching or counseling-related responsibilities.

- a. 0-5 hours
- b. 6-10 hours
- c. 11+ hours

**B4.** Do you have an additional (non-school) job during the school year (do not include summer)?

- a. yes
- b. no

**B5.** If you answered “yes” to question B4, how many hours per week do you spend at that job?

- a. 0 - 5 hours
- b. 6-10 hours
- c. 11+ hours

**B6.** How often do you feel pressured by a student to change a grade?

- |          |          |           |          |
|----------|----------|-----------|----------|
| Never    | Rarely   | Sometimes | Often    |
| <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b>  | <b>4</b> |

**B7.** How often do you receive calls or emails from parents on issues other than their child’s grade?

- |          |          |           |          |
|----------|----------|-----------|----------|
| Never    | Rarely   | Sometimes | Often    |
| <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b>  | <b>4</b> |

**B8.** How often do you feel pressured by parents to change a grade for their child?

- |          |          |           |          |
|----------|----------|-----------|----------|
| Never    | Rarely   | Sometimes | Often    |
| <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b>  | <b>4</b> |

**B9.** Please rate the degree to which you perceive stress to be a problem in your life. Please answer using a 5-point scale where ‘1’ means “Not A Problem at All” and ‘5’ means “A Severe Problem.”

- |                      |          |          |          |                  |
|----------------------|----------|----------|----------|------------------|
| Not A Problem At All |          |          |          | A Severe Problem |
| <b>1</b>             | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | <b>5</b>         |

**B10.** The following statements address the various ways people manage their stress. For each statement, please indicate the frequency with which you manage your stress in the following ways. Please use a 5-point scale where “1” means that you “Never” manage your stress this way and “5” means that you “Always” manage your stress this way.

	Never			Always	
a. I exercise to manage my stress.	1	2	3	4	5
b. I engage in unhealthy activities to manage my stress.	1	2	3	4	5
c. I talk to a trusted friend/relative to manage my stress.	1	2	3	4	5
d. I make time to be alone to manage my stress.	1	2	3	4	5
e. I engage in activities I enjoy to manage my stress (e.g., read a book, listen to music).	1	2	3	4	5
f. I engage in relaxation activities (e.g., meditation, yoga) to manage my stress.	1	2	3	4	5
g. I eat a nutritious diet to manage my stress.	1	2	3	4	5
h. I sleep to manage my stress.	1	2	3	4	5

**B11.** Please rate the degree to which the following cause you school-related stress.

	Very Little Stress			Extreme Stress	
a. Behavioral issues in the classroom	1	2	3	4	5
b. Compliance with educational plans and 504's	1	2	3	4	5
c. Parental Interactions	1	2	3	4	5
d. Standardized Testing	1	2	3	4	5
e. Covering Curriculum Content	1	2	3	4	5
f. Issues with administration	1	2	3	4	5
g. Workload	1	2	3	4	5
h. Class Size	1	2	3	4	5
i. Department Culture	1	2	3	4	5
j. School Culture	1	2	3	4	5

## SECTION C

The next set of questions is focused on your perceptions of student workload and stress.

**C1.** Please rate the degree to which you perceive stress to be a problem worthy of addressing at our school. Please answer using a 5-point scale where '1' means "Not A Problem at All" and '5' means "A Severe Problem."

Not A Problem At All					A Severe Problem
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	

**C2.** How often do students come to you for help with the following types of stress?

	Never				Always
a. Academic Stress	1	2	3	4	5
b. Social Stress	1	2	3	4	5
c. Stress Associated with Extracurricular Activities	1	2	3	4	5
d. Job Stress	1	2	3	4	5
d. Family Stress	1	2	3	4	5

**C3.** Which of the following are the ways you help reduce the level of stress in your students' lives? Please identify all that are relevant.

- a. Help with his/her homework
- b. Provide emotional support
- c. Give an extension
- d. Talk with him/her about friends and difficult social situations
- e. Help him/her prioritize and organize
- f. Change due dates for tests/projects
- g. Talk about college/future goals

**C4.** Please indicate what percentage of your students you perceive to have a significant amount of stress in their lives.

- a. 0-10%
- b. 11-30%
- c. 31-50%
- d. 51-75%
- e. greater than 75%

**C5.** On average, how much time do you *expect* that students are spending on homework (for all classes combined) each night?

- a. 0-1 hour
- b. 2-3 hours
- c. 4-5 hours
- d. 6 or more hours

**C6.** Please rate how often you change due dates/workload based on feedback from students.

Never				Always
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

**C7.** Do you use a formal mechanism (like a survey) to obtain feedback on workload, class experience, etc. from students?

- a. yes
- b. no

## HOMEWORK SURVEY

The following letter and survey were used by parents, Kerry Dickinson and Julie Kurtz, to see if other parents were concerned about excessive homework in their school district. See the Case Studies in Part 5 of this Guide for more information about how this survey was used.

Dear Parents,

The purpose of this parent survey is to gather data to present to the \_\_\_\_\_ Superintendent's office regarding homework in our school district. A core group of parents in our community has begun to look at many issues surrounding the quantity and quality of homework in the \_\_\_\_\_ district, at all grade levels. This survey will take only a few minutes of your time. Names of those completing the survey will be kept confidential. Only the aggregated data and number of completed surveys will be presented to the district.

Please complete and send your responses by \_\_\_\_\_ .

### HOMEWORK SURVEY

1. Do or did your children attend a school in the [ \_\_\_\_\_ ] District?  
(If yes, skip to question 3).
2. If not, what city and state do you live in?
3. What grade(s) are your children in?
4. In your estimation, what is the average amount of time your child(ren) currently spend on homework per night? On the weekends?
5. By your best guess, what percentage of the homework given is of a high quality?
6. How do you define "high quality homework?"
7. By your best guess, what percentage of the homework is of lower quality, or considered "busywork" or not meaningful?
8. If you or your child(ren) could change one major thing about his or her homework, what would it be?
9. According to your child(ren), what was the best homework assignment ever given? Why did he or she like it?
10. List several adjectives your children use to describe homework.
11. Would you be willing to come to a meeting to discuss issues regarding the quality and quantity of homework in the [ \_\_\_\_\_ ] District?
12. Other comments about homework?

Thank you. We greatly appreciate your input.

## 6.3

### SAMPLE LETTERS RE: OPTING OUT OF STANDARDIZED TESTING

The Following letters are from the Coalition for Better Education, a Colorado based group that encourages parents/guardians to opt their children out of standardized testing. The website is [www.thecebe.org](http://www.thecebe.org).

#### Sample Letter #1

School: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal: \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Please be advised that my child, \_\_\_\_\_, will not be participating in the \_\_\_\_\_ testing during the current school year. I understand that the law provides the parent or guardian the right of choice regarding this standardized testing. In my opinion, such testing is not in the best interests of our children since it promotes competition instead of cooperation, and blunts, not stimulates, our children's curiosity. I understand, too, that the school will provide appropriate learning activities during testing times. I request that no record of \_\_\_\_\_ testing be part of my child's permanent file.

Parent/Guardian Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

cc District Superintendent, Classroom Teacher

## Sample Letter #2\*

Opt-Out of Testing Notice

School District Name: \_\_\_\_\_

I do not wish my child to participate in standardized achievement testing for promotion or school/state report cards. I believe such testing to be unjust, counter-productive, and harmful to the education and development of my child. Timed one-chance tests subject my child to possible humiliation and failure without regard to variables in context or circumstance affecting performance on the day of testing.

No Child Left Behind:

1. Is not scientifically-based.
2. Is test-driven education and it is not meeting the individual needs of students.
3. Violates the U.S. Constitution.
4. Supports complicity of corporate interests rather than democracy based on public concerns.
5. Fosters coercion over cooperation with regards to federal funding for public education.
6. Does not follow the U.S. government's own data on learning. Ultimately, the state is required to provide my child with an education in a least restrictive environment. My child should proceed to learn and develop at his or her own pace with peers under the guidance of education professionals. The state oversteps its bounds and does a disservice to the public when it ignores professionals in local schools, arbitrarily making educational decisions based solely upon standardized tests.

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Parent/guardian \_\_\_\_\_

Grade \_\_\_\_\_ Student \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher \_\_\_\_\_ School \_\_\_\_\_

Opt-Out

\* Created by Susan Ohanian ([www.susanohanian.org](http://www.susanohanian.org)).

### Sample Letter #3\*

#### Opt-Out of Testing Notice

I do not wish my child, \_\_\_\_\_, to participate in standardized achievement testing for promotion or school/state report cards. I believe such testing to be unjust, counter-productive, and harmful to the education and development of my child. This stand is based upon my conscientious objection to the State using an arbitrary measure to make high-stakes decisions about my child with disregard to the input of this school district's educational professionals.

It is unjust to promote or retain my child based upon a one-time assessment when more authentic, reliable, and less harmful methods are available. Such methods include, but are not limited to, anecdotal teacher feedback, assignment grades, exhibitions, portfolios, grade point averages, and the average of multiple traditional assessments.

As a parent/guardian I consider the education and development of my child a chief responsibility and priority. Timed, one-chance tests subject my child to possible humiliation and failure without regard to variables in context or circumstances affecting performance on the day of testing.

My child has a right to an education that is free of arbitrary constraints predicated on a one-size-fits-all testing program – especially when trained educational professionals are present and able to make decisions. Public school teachers, counselors, and administrators, as agents of the State, should have the final authority on whether to promote or retain my child.

Ultimately, the state is required to provide my child an education in a least restrictive environment. My child should proceed to learn and develop at his or her own pace with peers under the guidance of education professionals. The State oversteps its bounds and does a disservice to the public when it ignores professionals in local schools, arbitrarily making educational decisions based solely upon standardized tests.

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Parent/guardian \_\_\_\_\_

Grade \_\_\_\_\_ Student \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher \_\_\_\_\_ School \_\_\_\_\_

Opt-Out

\* Created by Susan Ohanian ([www.susanohanian.org](http://www.susanohanian.org)).

**SAMPLE LETTER ENCOURAGING PARENTS TO WRITE TO SUPERINTENDENTS ABOUT THE ISSUES COVERED IN *RACE TO NOWHERE*\***

Dear Parents,

I am writing to you to encourage you to write to our superintendent \_\_\_\_\_ about your concerns over the educational issues addressed in the movie *Race to Nowhere* particularly surrounding the issue of [homework].

Even if you haven't seen the movie, chances are the issues of [stress over homework and lack of family time] have touched your home lives.

I know that many of you and many more of your friends and fellow parents were as moved by the information presented in the movie as I was and have spoken with each other and your children's school's leadership about your concerns.

I'm writing to you to ask you to consider also writing an email to \_\_\_\_\_, our school superintendent, to let him know your concerns. It seems none of us has done this yet and he/she is assuming it is because we are happy with the status quo.

We have a great opportunity to support the fantastic quality of education our children receive here in \_\_\_\_\_ by insisting that our district leadership adopt best practices by [eliminating or reducing time spent on homework]. If you have time to send a letter in your own words that would be great.

Please let your friends and fellow parents know about this important step so that we can affect change.

Send your letter and then join together through our group \_\_\_\_\_ [on the End the Race website or Facebook] to add your letter and read what other parents are saying.

Thank you,  
Parent

\* Contributed by a San Francisco Bay Area parent following a screening of the film

**SAMPLE LETTER TO SEND TO SUPERINTENDENT AFTER WATCHING  
RACE TO NOWHERE\***

Dear Superintendent:

I want to thank the district for making a showing of the movie *Race to Nowhere* available to our community. This is an important reflection of our education system and one worth considering in our school district. While our school district has many innovative education practices that represent best practices in the field of education, the movie made quite obvious one way we fall short is in our homework policies.

It is so frustrating for me as a parent of a [fourth] grader to realize that, according to most available research, all the time my child has spent doing homework has most likely not benefited her. This seems like a tragic waste of her time, her teacher's time and our family time. After seeing the film, I looked at some of the research available about the value of homework. Harris Cooper, the researcher who suggested the 10 min. per grade policy, actually found that homework is of no benefit to grade schooler's learning but, in fact, recommends this policy with no data to back it up. He simply states this policy in his conclusion as an opinion and adds that it might help children's independent study habits. It doesn't. No available research has found this. In fact, the only kind of learning that homework seems to be good for is short-term fact-cramming like spelling tests. This benefit is lost over time though, because after a few weeks children test at the same level as before studying. There does, however, seem to be a benefit to children reading at home. Tragically, this is the one thing children do not get to do because the homework takes up too much of their time.

All of my daughter's teachers took and take great pains to make sure the homework they assign is for the most part relevant and of high quality. The sad truth is that their time and attention are wasted. Quality in elementary school has nothing to do with it. Elementary school children simply do not benefit from homework.

I was particularly disheartened to see how the middle school is assessing its homework load by asking parents' opinions. Why can't we look at what is actually beneficial for students? Research suggests it's about 1 hour a night. Beyond that, the benefit falls off rapidly and we run the risk of sleep deprivation, burnout and lack of engagement for our students.

Children spend a long time in school every day and they need their time outside of school to benefit from the opportunities that unstructured time allows their development. This cannot be overstated. Earlier this year, I attended a PTSA meeting at \_\_\_\_\_ where students spoke about the academic climate in response to a speaker. The speaker's message was not popular among the students present at the meeting and one student stated that she didn't want or need any free time. If she wasn't doing homework, she said, she would just waste her time or get into trouble. Is this really what we want? Children who don't know what to do with themselves with free time? Children who claim they are not feeling the stress but when asked about their friends, described depression, anxiety, stimulant use and coming to school sick having gotten no sleep?

Achievement takes tenacity and sometimes sacrifice but in the case of our elementary school's and our middle school's homework policies, we are asking for the sacrifice of children's, teacher's, and families' time for no benefit. And, I would suggest, to the great harm of children. We as a district must take this research seriously and create expectations for our children's education that are results-oriented, not opinion-oriented, and homework is not part of that picture in elementary school.

Please do the right thing by the children of our community.

Sincerely,  
Parent

\* Contributed by a San Francisco Bay Area parent following a screening of the film

### For Elementary Students

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

As a parent of a current \_\_\_\_\_ District elementary student, I respectfully ask that the district change its policy regarding homework and initiate a new policy of no homework except for reading in the elementary grades.

Sincerely,  
<Your name>

### For Middle School Students

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

As a parent of a current \_\_\_\_\_ student, I respectfully ask that the district change its policy regarding homework and limit homework to the following:

**Grade 6, 7 and 8 up to 60 minutes each night**

**Additional time may be requested or required for daily independent reading.**

It is recommended that communication structures exist among teachers so this limit is not exceeded. In addition, I ask that teachers coordinate project deadlines and testing dates so that students will not have multiple projects due or tests on a single day or following school holidays or breaks.

Sincerely,  
<Your name>

6.7

**TIME MANAGEMENT ACTIVITY FOR STUDENTS\***

This activity is intended to help students anticipate the time they will need to remain healthy, happy and engaged learners.

FILL OUT FOR YOUR BUSIEST SEMESTER

School Activities	Avg. Hours/Week
School (5 days X 7 hours)	35
<i>Anticipated Homework for Leveled Courses:</i>	
Advanced Placement: <b>1+ hour x 5 nights weekly x # of courses</b>	
Accelerated: <b>1 hour x 4 nights weekly x # of courses</b>	
Honors & Standard: <b>0.5 hours x 4 nights weekly x # of courses</b>	
Total School Hours:	<input type="text"/>

Extracurricular Activities	Avg. Hours/Week
Paid Job	
Hobbies/Interests/Clubs	
Community Service	
Sports	
Music/Performances	
Total Extracurricular Hours:	<input type="text"/>

Daily Living Activities	Avg. Hours/Week
Sleep (7 days X 9 recommended hours)	
Physical Activity (1 hour recommended – may be sports or PE)	
Necessities (eating, showering, chores, etc.)	
Family Time	
Free Time (friends, TV, phone, Internet, etc.)	
Total Daily Living Hours:	<input type="text"/>

TOTAL HOURS/WEEK		AVAILABLE
School Hours	▶ _____ +	Maximum hours <b>168</b>
Extracurricular Hours	▶ _____ +	
Daily Living Hours	▶ _____ =	
YOUR TOTAL HOURS	<input type="text"/> vs. _____	

\* Created by Needham High School, Needham, MA



## PART SEVEN: ADVOCACY

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You can make a difference! The following information about advocacy tells you how to get started. Go to the End the Race website at [www.EndTheRace.org](http://www.EndTheRace.org) to find samples and templates for letters, petitions and other tools that can be used to support your role as an advocate.

- 1 Advocacy 101
- 2 Communicating with Policy Makers
- 3 Organizing and Facilitating Meetings
- 4 Sample Advocacy Letters

### What is advocacy?

Advocacy is the act of supporting a cause and then educating and influencing others for an intended outcome.

### Why do I need to be an advocate?

- ...to have a voice
- ...to speak for those whose voices aren't often heard
- ...to protect children's health and well being
- ...to affect change

### What do I need to become an advocate?

A caring heart, a passion for a cause and a desire to make a difference

## STEPS TO ADVOCACY

- Step 1:** Define the Issue
- Step 2:** Do the Research/Get the Facts
- Step 3:** Build a Team
- Step 4:** Call a Meeting
- Step 5:** Make a Plan
- Step 6:** Identify Short- and Long-Term Goals
- Step 7:** Act/Evaluate/Review
- Step 8:** Have Fun

● **Step 1.** Define the Issue – *Follow your heart.*

*Although the ultimate goal is education transformation, it is important to be selective and concise when advocating for what you want. Small steps are better than no steps.*

- Identify the goal (e.g., education transformation)
- State the issue/identify the problem (e.g., the high-stakes culture is negatively affecting the physical and emotional health and well-being of students and teachers and is leaving young people unprepared for the future.)
- Provide some specifics (e.g., increased rate of depression and stress in students)
- Identify some solutions/what do you want? (e.g., create political will to address practices and policies around high-stakes testing, homework, grading and assessments, school schedules, teaching and learning strategies, etc.)
- Familiarize yourself with other organizations that are involved in the same/similar issue. (Become knowledgeable about their reputations and positions to see which groups make natural allies and which groups are not in sync with your goals.)
- Be positive

● **Step 2:** Do the Research/Get the Facts – *Knowledge is power.*

*Effective advocacy requires the ability to know the research supporting your position. It is also important to know and be able to anticipate what the “other side” is going to say or argue.*

- Where to go for information:
  - Teachers
  - Parents
  - Libraries
  - Internet
  - News Media
  - Trade Journals
  - Government Publications
  - Surveys and Interviews
  - Books
  - Organizations and Community Groups
  - Films

- Develop “Talking Points”
- Create Fact Sheets

● **Step 3:** Build a Team – *One voice is powerful yet there is strength in numbers.*

*It is important to establish contacts and alliances with other students, teachers, parents, groups, organizations and agencies.*

- Talk to everyone – students, teachers, parents, community members
- Host a gathering in your home, restaurant, school or other venue
- Speak to organizations
- Distribute flyers
- Create alliances and coalitions
- Establish a strategy to keep information and communication flowing, e.g., phone trees, Facebook pages or groups on the End the Race website
- Use the internet – listservs and social networking sites to get people on your team

● **Step 4:** Call a Meeting – *Humans are social beings.*

*Having a meeting is the first step to organizing a group. People like to know that they are not alone in their cause. It solidifies purpose and enhances optimism, energy and motivation for all.*

- Find a place to host a meeting: home, school, place of worship, community center, library, restaurant
- Set an agenda and stick to it
- Begin and end the meeting on time

● **Step 5:** Make a Plan – *Brainstorm all possibilities.*

*Organization is key. It is important to make sure that everyone agrees to follow the plan and stay “on-message.” Be clear on what your goal is and what you will settle for. Create a strategy and a calendar. Evaluate progress along the way.*

- Have someone be a recorder to capture ideas at all meetings
- Give enough time for everyone to contribute
- Listen respectfully and attentively

- Be positive – everyone’s ideas have value
- Be creative – all ideas have potential
- Decide on your audience – who has the authority to do what?

● **Step 6:** Identify Short and Long-Term Goals – *Planning change.*

*Think about what you might be able to achieve in a short amount of time and what your long-term goals are. If you choose some short-term goals that you can achieve right away, your group will be energized to continue making progress. When choosing some short-term goals, be specific.*

*Consider:*

- What tasks are needed to reach these goals?
- Who can take on these tasks?
- Who else might be interested in joining your efforts?
- How might these short-term goals help us reach our longer term goals?

● **Step 7:** Act/Evaluate/Review – *Make it happen.*

*Be persistent, patient, honest and respectful. Engage everyone. Be brave.*

- Pick up the phone to communicate with educational stakeholders and elected officials
- Write letters to communicate with educational stakeholders and elected officials
- Schedule visits with stakeholders
- Be succinct in identifying the issue and offering some solutions
- Write letters to the editor and op-ed pieces for newspapers
- Create a petition
- Send e-mails
- Distribute flyers
- Use the Internet -listservs and social networking sites
- Create a blog
- Set up meetings with individual stakeholders at all levels
- Get on the agenda of meetings hosted by organizations and associations at all levels

- Questions to ask when evaluating progress:
  - What were the positive aspects of the planning process and action?
  - What strengths emerged?
  - What was challenging? What were the obstacles?
  - How were challenges and obstacles overcome?
  - What can we do next time to make it better?
  - How well did we work as a team?
  - How can we be more effective as a team?
  - Did we have enough resources (e.g., volunteers, money, equipment, time)? If not, how can we make it better?

● **Step 8:** Have Fun – *Take care of yourself.*

*Advocacy is fun and exciting but it also can be overwhelming and sometimes even discouraging. It is important to know when you may need a break or need some support. You have to help yourself first to be able to help others. Stay happy and healthy.*

- Celebrate victories – no matter how small
- Be optimistic
- Try new things
- Work with friends
- Support each other
- Find creative ways to stay motivated and focused
- Look at challenges as opportunities
- Always remember your purpose
- Take a break if you need one

**COMMUNICATING WITH POLICYMAKERS**

A policymaker is someone on any level – classroom, school, community, local, state, national or international – who has the authority to influence or determine policies or practices. Group and/or individual contacts are among the most effective ways to communicate with policymakers. When communicating with policymakers remember:

**Stay organized.** Maintain a list of the names, addresses, phone/fax numbers, websites and e-mail addresses for all policymakers whom you want to contact. Keep a good record of your progress in communication noting the following: contacts you have made, including how you contacted them; meetings scheduled, including where and with whom; summary of each meeting or communication; follow-up plans agreed upon by you and the people with whom you met; thank you notes sent. Do the same for all other contacts – people and organizations.

**Schedule an appointment.** If the elected representative is unavailable, arrange a meeting with the aide handling the issue. When making the appointment, specify how much time will be needed.

**Be prepared.** Whether you are prepared or not will become obvious to anyone with whom you speak.

**Arrive on time.** During the introduction, state the issue(s) of concern. Keep the time frame in mind during the meeting.

**Be positive, respectful and succinct.** Be respectful of behavior, manner and time. Be mindful of crafting a well-delivered, brief message that clearly states the issue, problem and suggested solutions. Minimize jargon. Leave behind a fact-sheet with your contact information. Follow-up with a thank-you note.

**Be honest.** If you don't know the answer to a question, don't make up an answer. You will be respected for being honest. Politely explain that you will do some additional research and get back to them.

**Ask for a commitment.** If the person you are talking with is unable to make a commitment, tactfully state that you are willing to call at a later time to learn the decision. If the response is positive, respond, "We appreciate your support." If

the response is negative, ask, “What are your specific objections or concerns?” Leave respectfully but don’t always settle for “no” as an answer. You can, and should, get back to them – without being rude – if you can supply them with information that addresses their objections and concerns.

**Always write a thank-you note.** It is important to remember to develop and maintain positive relationships. You will want to keep the door open for further and future communication.

## TARGETING YOUR AUDIENCE

*Examples of people and groups to target at different levels*

### School Level

Speak to everyone and attend meetings, conferences and workshops.

- Students
- Teachers
- Principal
- Staff
- Coaches
- Parents
- School Counselors
- School groups e.g., PTA/PTO, School Site Council, Teacher Unions

### District Level

Attend council, district and State meetings, conferences and workshops.

- School Board
- Superintendent
- Positions at the District Office, e.g., Curriculum and Instruction; Testing Services; Health/Wellness

### Community Level

- Businesses/Merchants
- Faith-Based Organizations
- Coaches and Recreation Leaders
- Medical and Health Community

### State and National Level

*Don't be shy about making contact and don't get discouraged; persistence pays off. Be willing to meet with someone's aide or representative.*

Legislators and their representatives

State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Specific Offices at the State Department of Education

State Organizations/State Affiliates of National Organizations

e.g., PTA/PTO, School Board Association

National level organizations and associations

Federal Secretary of Education

Specific Offices in the Federal Department of Education

President/First Lady

## ORGANIZING AND FACILITATING MEETINGS

Well-organized meetings are efficient, effective and fun. Hosting a successful first meeting creates momentum, builds confidence and gets people excited about what they will be able to accomplish together. A well-planned agenda outlining the process for the meeting keeps everyone focused.

After the first meeting, you may want to consider having a short presentation at each meeting on a subject of interest. The first few meetings should focus on advocacy and ways to advocate. Remember, there is a role for everyone and you want people to be comfortable so that they participate. Presentations for future meetings could include inviting a guest speaker, talking about a specific issue in detail, going over fact sheets and resources, preparing for a special event, etc. (If you invite a speaker, make sure you tell him/her how much time they have for their presentation and questions.)

### Things to remember:

- Stay focused on the agenda. If conversations start to stray, remind people that there is a time in the agenda for new business.
- Make sure the place that you choose to host the meeting has the capacity to accommodate everyone comfortably.
- Food, drinks, snacks are a nice touch but do not let them be a distraction.
- Provide nametags. Don't assume that everyone knows each other.
- Have guests fill out a sign-in sheet with names, addresses, phone and fax numbers and email addresses.
- If a decision cannot be reached on a particular agenda or action item, table it until the next meeting and ask members to seek additional information that may help in the decision making process when it is brought up next time.
- Limit meetings to no more than two hours.

### Keeping a record of group meetings

- Ask for a volunteer to take minutes at each meeting.
- Minutes do not have to be word-for-word. They should include the topic/item/issue discussed, highlights of the discussion, action or task taken, and the final decision made by the group. Include the name of the person responsible for the task and the date for interim progress points and/or completion.

Distribute the minutes when you distribute the agenda for the next meeting.

At every new meeting, the group should vote to accept the minutes from the previous meeting or to change them as needed.

## FIRST MEETING

*The main objectives of this meeting are to do the following:*

- Understand the purpose of the group
- Introduce and get to know members
- Determine how the group wants to organize and schedule future meetings
- Include everyone in the discussions

Sample agenda and approximate times for your first meeting:

### Agenda

*Race To Nowhere*

Meeting Place:

Date:

Time:

Facilitator:

**1. Welcome and introductions (20 min.)**

Pass around a sheet of paper for people to gather contact information.  
Have people go around and introduce themselves and say why they are there.

**2. Provide background about the movie, *Race To Nowhere*, and the purpose of the meeting (20 min.)**

Why are we here?  
What are we trying to achieve?  
What are the benefits of being part of a group?

**3. Briefly identify your short-term and long-term hopes and goals of the group then ask each member to express his/hers. (20 min.)**

4. **Brainstorm ideas for advocacy — immediate advocacy and long-term (20 min.)**  
Remember that all ideas are welcomed and valued.
5. **Brainstorm ideas for getting more people involved (10 min.)**  
Ask each member to “bring a friend” to the next meeting.
6. **Share calendar of upcoming events/announcements (5 min.)**
7. **Debrief about meeting (10 min.)**  
What went well?  
What were some challenges? How might the challenges be addressed?
8. **Set date, time, location of next meeting (5 min.)**
9. **Thank everyone for coming (3 min.)**
10. **Adjourn meeting (2 min.)**

## SECOND MEETING

*The main objectives of this meeting are to do the following:*

- Introduce and get to know new members
- Understand the basics about advocacy
- Begin developing action items
- Include everyone in the discussions

Sample agenda and approximate times for your second meeting:

### Agenda

*Race To Nowhere*

Meeting Place:

Date:

Time:

Facilitator:

- 1. Welcome and introductions** (8 min.)
- 2. Approve minutes from last meeting** (2 min.)
- 3. Provide brief presentation on the basics of advocacy** (20 min.)  
(Refer to fact sheet: Advocacy 101)
- 4. Ask if anyone engaged in any advocacy activities since last meeting** (10 min.)  
If so, ask what they were and what happened  
Discuss strengths and challenges and need for any follow-up action
- 5. Provide update on any other action items from first meeting if applicable** (15 min.)  
Discuss outcomes  
Evaluate strengths and challenges  
Determine follow-up action
- 6. Discuss ideas to make your group effective, e.g., forming committees – this can be done around issues such as homework policies, AP class policies, or around tasks such as phone calls, letter writing, creating a blog/newsletter** (20 min.)
- 7. Bring up new business/announcements** (5 min.)
- 8. Identify new action items and develop a plan of action** (15 min.)  
Prioritize  
Identify who is responsible and timeline
- 9. Debrief about meeting** (10 min.)  
What went well? What were some challenges? How might the challenges be addressed?
- 10. Set date, time, location of next meeting** (3 min.)
- 11. Thank everyone for coming** (1 min.)
- 12. Adjourn meeting** (1 min.)

## FUTURE MEETINGS

*Identify the objectives:*

Sample agenda and approximate times for future meetings:

### Agenda

*Race To Nowhere*

Meeting Place:

Date:

Time:

Facilitator:

1. **Welcome and introductions** (8 min.)
2. **Approve minutes from last meeting** (2 min.)
3. **Presentation** (20 min.)
4. **Provide update on action items since last meeting** (20 min.)
  - Report on each action item
  - Discuss outcomes
  - Evaluate strengths and challenges
  - Determine follow-up action
5. **Bring up new business/announcements** (5 min.)
6. **Identify new action items and develop a plan of action** (20 min.)
  - Prioritize
  - Identify who is responsible and timeline
7. **Debrief about meeting** (10 min.)
  - What went well? What were some challenges? How might the challenges be addressed?
8. **Set date, time, location of next meeting** (3 min.)
9. **Thank everyone for coming** (1 min.)
10. **Adjourn meeting** (1 min.)

## SAMPLE ADVOCACY LETTERS

- Decide to whom you will write.
- Use a business letter format.
- Use correct salutations and addresses for the recipient.
- If it is a letter to the editor you can begin by, “Dear Editor”
- Elected officials should be addressed as “The Honorable” (i.e., The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_, or Dear Senator \_\_\_\_\_).

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

*or*

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

- Include your name and address on both your letter and envelope.
- Include your other important contact information in the letter—Name, address, telephone number and e-mail address.
- Keep it short—one page!

## Sample Letter – Generic

Your Name  
Full Address  
All contact information

Date

Recipient's Name/Title  
Full Address

Dear [Recipient's name]:

**First Paragraph:** Introduce yourself and tell who you are. State your reason for writing – what you want and why. (If the letter pertains to a specific bill or piece of legislation, identify it in the letter.)

**Second Paragraph:** Support the issue you are addressing with key statistics, compelling facts, and/or background information.

**Third Paragraph:** Share your story to clarify your position.

**Fourth Paragraph:** Summarize and reiterate your position/request. Identify other ways your recipient can help with the issue (e.g., attending school board meetings; hosting town hall meetings.)

**Fifth Paragraph:** Thank recipient for reading the letter and ask for a reply with his/her position on the issue and/or how he/she will address the issue.

Sincerely,  
[Your name]

## Sample Letter Template

Your Name  
Full Address  
Contact Information

Date

Recipient's Name  
Full Address

Dear [*Recipient*],

My name is [*your name*]. I am writing to ask that you support education initiatives that support the emotional and physical health and well being of all children.

We can no longer afford to turn our backs on the systemic pressures faced by youth, teachers and parents in our high-stakes education system and culture. The demands have crushing, unintended consequences. Many students are disengaged, cheating is commonplace, stress-related illness, depression and burnout are rampant, and students arrive at college and the workplace unprepared and uninspired.

I specifically am requesting that you take action to [*be specific*]. Currently [*briefly provide some compelling facts and statistics about the issue*]. This issue is important to me personally because [*briefly provide something personal about how you or your child is affected*].

You are empowered with the capacity and privilege to make a difference. I urge you to take the necessary steps and [*reiterate action you want taken*] so that our students can benefit from an education that supports them in becoming whole individuals who will flourish into healthy, bright, and contributing citizens of the 21st century.

Thank you for your time. I hope that I can count on you for your support. I look forward to hearing back from you in the coming weeks.

Sincerely,  
[*Your name*]



## PART EIGHT: RESEARCH FACT SHEETS

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While many of us instinctively know that the educational system needs to be changed, there is also reputable research that highlights the issues we face in the over-pressured and often under-funded education system that is hurting our children, families and schools. The next few pages include fact sheets that can be copied and distributed at film showings or during workshops related to *Race to Nowhere*.

- 1 Homework Facts and Policy Changes
- 2 Examples of Changed Homework Policies
- 3 Two Parents Create a Differentiated Homework Plan
- 4 Assessment, Advanced Placement (AP) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB)
  - a. Assessment in Early Childhood Education
  - b. AP: Is it Worth it?
  - c. The Emphasis on Breadth Versus Depth
  - d. The Failings of No Child Left Behind (NCLB)
- 5 Race to the Top Fact Sheet
- 6 The Time and Access Gap: Deepening the Divide
- 7 Risks to Physical and Emotional Health
  - a. Stress and Young People
  - b. Sleep Deprivation
  - c. Depression and Suicide
- 8 Factors that Promote Healthy and Resilient Youth
- 9 Activities that Support Social, Emotional and Cognitive Growth
- 10 Consequences of Over-Tested, Over-Scheduled Youth
  - a. Cheating
  - b. Disengagement
  - c. Play and Downtime
  - d. Physical Health
  - e. Remediation Rates in College and College Graduation
  - f. Tutoring and Testing
  - g. Use and Abuse of Drugs
  - h. Physical Injuries

## 8.1

### HOMework FACTS AND POLICY CHANGES

In an interview in *Parent and Child Magazine*, the author, educator, and activist, Alfie Kohn, addresses the importance of parents knowing the facts about homework and organizing to change education policies:

*First, parents should educate themselves . . . Don't blindly assume that all homework assignments are valid; focus on quality, not just quantity. Consider whether assignments are reasonable and valuable. Second, parents should ask teachers and school administrators the probing questions. Not, when is it due? But, will my child be a more efficient learner? And finally I think parents should organize. We need to talk to one another, at birthday parties, in line at the supermarket, at play dates. Share articles and books that debunk misconceptions about homework. One parent with a legitimate concern can be dismissed. But 20 parents expressing that concern are hard to ignore.<sup>26</sup>*

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.<sup>27</sup>

An international comparison by two Penn State professors concluded that junior high 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. Conversely, the lowest-scoring students came from countries where teachers assign large amounts of homework, such as Iran, Thailand and Greece.<sup>28</sup>

Most teacher education programs do not cover research about homework. Consequently most teachers are unaware of the research-based critique of the way homework is used in the majority of schools in the US.<sup>29</sup>

When researchers from the University of Michigan compared the amount of homework assigned in 1981 to the amount assigned in 1997, they found that the amount of homework assigned to children aged 6 to 9 almost tripled during that time. Assigned homework increased from about 44 minutes a week to more than 2 hours a week. Homework for kids aged 9 to 11 increased from about 2 hours and 50 minutes to more than 3 and a-half hours per week.<sup>30</sup>

Professors Gerald LeTendre and David Baker of Pennsylvania State University conclude in their 2005 book, *National Differences, Global Similarities: World Culture and the Future of Schooling*, that American middle-school students do more homework than their peers in Japan, Korea or Taiwan, but less than their peers in Singapore and Hong Kong. One of the findings of

their research was that more homework does not correlate with higher test scores. LeTendre notes: “That really flummoxes people because they say, ‘Doesn’t doing more homework mean getting better scores?’ The answer quite simply is no.”<sup>31</sup>

The more important that homework becomes in school, the more a child can fall behind. Etta Kralovec, the director of teacher education at the College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, Maine, and author of *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning*, worked on a state-financed study there in the early '90s, interviewing dropouts about why they quit school. Every person in her survey mentioned the inability to keep up with homework as a major factor.<sup>32</sup>

Excessive homework leaves students with almost no downtime. Many students spend seven hours in school, an hour commuting, and one to two hours in after school activities. Some, particularly those who are low income, may also have jobs or help take care of younger siblings after school. School and these activities can easily add up to ten hours in a day. Add to that the time it takes to get ready in the morning and it is not a surprise that many students report little downtime, not enough time for sleep and certainly not enough time to read for pleasure.

## 8.2

### EXAMPLES OF CHANGED HOMEWORK POLICIES

Some schools that have eliminated homework, or limited homework to after-school reading:

- Bloomfield Middle School, Bloomfield Missouri;
- Grant Elementary School, Glenrock, Wyoming;
- Helendale Elementary and Middle Schools, Helendale, California;
- VanDamme Academy, Aliso Viejo, California;
- Nottingham East Academy, Nottingham, UK;
- Oak Knoll Elementary School, Menlo Park, California; and
- Tiffin Boys' School in Kingston, London, UK.

In Vermont, the Colchester School District now makes homework count for only 10% of a grade, instead of the previous 40%. In addition, under the district's new policy, students are no longer kept in from recess if they don't do their homework.<sup>33</sup>

The Broward County Florida School Board unanimously approved homework guidelines that urge teachers to assign academically challenging work while also being considerate about not assigning too much homework. The policy doesn't stipulate time limits for homework, but the district's guidelines suggest 10 minutes of work for each grade level. A first grader's assignment would take about 10 minutes to finish, while a high school junior's total homework load would take 110 minutes.<sup>34</sup>

Sparkhawk School, an independent K-12 school in Amesbury, Massachusetts, eliminated homework up to second grade, delayed it for third grade until January and enacted time restraints for fourth through sixth grades.

Raymond Park Middle School in Indianapolis states in its homework policy: "Perhaps the most important purpose homework can serve is to improve reading skills and develop an appreciation for reading. Much current and validated research shows that homework has little impact on improving achievement in the elementary grades. The one exception is reading."<sup>35</sup>

The Beacon Day School, in Oakland, California states: "Beacon recognizes that families – however constituted – are partners in each child's education. It is important that children are able to participate in family activities and that parents and guardians determine how to spend time with their children instead of having to do schoolwork."<sup>36</sup>

**The following editorial appeared in the *Globe and Mail* on Nov. 18, 2009 and details the successful efforts of two parents to decrease homework for their children in Calgary Schools:**

Move over Versailles and Ghent; Calgary is now the site of an historic peace treaty as well. As reported in *The Globe and Mail* yesterday, two Calgary parents, Shelli and Tom Milley, have successfully negotiated a truce in the Homework War.

Upset over increasing amounts of homework with little apparent educational value, the Milleys sat down with their local school and hammered out a “differentiated homework plan” that mandates a unique homework-free schooling arrangement for Spencer, aged 11, and Brittany, 10.

The plan sets out clear expectations for everyone involved. Spencer and Brittany are required to use their classroom time effectively, and prepare for tests and practice music at home. Their teachers must provide sufficient notice for tests as well as adequate in-class time for work that is to be evaluated. Homework is not to be marked. The parents promise to support their children’s study habits at home. It seems a very reasonable agreement.

Homework is a frequent source of domestic conflict and concern. A poll by the Canadian Council on Learning found that nearly three-quarters of all parents consider it to be a major cause of stress in their family.

Yet homework battles often say more about adult expectations than the needs of children. Many parents see homework as a visible sign that the school system is sufficiently rigorous and they demand more of it. Others, like the Milleys, are skeptical about its usefulness and wish to see less. The evidence tends to support the Milleys, particularly in the younger grades.

Consider the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. This comparison of 50 countries looked at science performance across students in Grades 4 and 8. It concluded that homework was completely irrelevant: “Average achievement was lowest among students at the high level of the science homework index.” Assigning more homework had no impact on marks.

Overall, research suggests homework at the elementary level has little or no observable effect on performance. All it does is condition students to expect homework in high school – where it does appear to be positively correlated with academic achievement.

This suggests that school boards could easily curtail homework until Grade 9 without fear of educational harm. Younger students could thus be encouraged to read at home, play sports or music and spend more stress-free time with their family. In other words, exactly what the Milley children will be doing now that they have been freed from the homework millstone.

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 issued 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 that determine curriculum and instructional methodology.”<sup>37</sup>

### Assessment in Early Childhood Education

To help young children learn, assessment must be a part of the regular classroom program, in which teachers who know the children are the primary assessors. Standardized, multiple-choice achievement tests, however, are developed by large publishing companies which have no connection to local curricula and which are not accountable to local communities.<sup>38</sup>

Research presented at a 1996 national Head Start conference demonstrated that children attending developmentally appropriate K-2 classes scored higher in reading and math than those who attended classes that were more strictly academically oriented.<sup>39</sup>

The National Association for the Education of Young Children in partnership with the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education issued a position statement on curriculum, assessment and program evaluation that stated standards for comprehensive assessment. The standards described in this document cannot be measured by standardized tests. For example, the position paper states that in programs for children who are 8 years old or younger:

[Assessment should include] evidence gathered from realistic settings and situations that reflect children’s actual performance. To influence teaching strategies or to identify children in need of further evaluation, the evidence used to assess young children’s characteristics and progress [should be] derived from real-world classroom or family contexts that are consistent with children’s culture, language, and experiences.

Assessments [should use] multiple sources of evidence gathered over time. The assessment system emphasizes repeated, systematic observation, documentation, and other forms of criterion- or performance-oriented assessment using broad, varied, and complementary methods with accommodations for children with disabilities.<sup>40</sup>

### Advancement Placement (AP): Is it worth it?

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.<sup>41</sup>

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.<sup>42</sup>

A *USA Today* analysis found that the number of students who took 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>43</sup>

### The Emphasis on Breadth Versus Depth

The curriculum that gets covered in AP courses is driven by the AP test that students pay for and take at the end of the course. These tests are NOT created by the teacher teaching the class but rather by an outside organization called the College Board. The amount of information that has to be covered in AP courses precludes a teacher from having the ability to delve deeper into concepts discussed or to follow inquiries or new “trains of thought” initiated by students.

Philip Sadler, a Harvard researcher who conducted the survey of 18,000 college students cited above, also found that students whose high school coursework emphasizes depth over breadth perform better in college courses. “Hurrying to the back of the textbook, so to speak, is worse than focusing in depth on the first few chapters,” Sadler says.<sup>44</sup> The study states that standardized testing, which seeks to measure overall knowledge in an entire discipline, may miss capturing a students’ high level of mastery in a few key science topics. Teachers who “teach to the test” may not be optimizing their students’ chance of success in college science courses, said Marc S. Schwartz, a researcher who worked with Sadler.<sup>45</sup>

### The Failings of No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

The share of fourth-graders proficient in reading, based on federal National Assessment of Educational Progress Standardized Test results, climbed by one-half a percentage point each year, on average, between the mid-1990s and 2002.

But over the four years after NCLB was passed, the share of students deemed proficient declined by about one percent.<sup>46</sup>

Three years after NCLB was instituted:

- Reading scores among fourth graders remained flat, with 31% of the nation's children at or above proficient in 2002, 2003, and 2005.
- The share of eighth-grade students proficient or above in reading had fallen two percentage points.
- The percentage of fourth graders proficient in math continued to climb between 2003 and 2005. Math scores at the eighth-grade level stayed at a flat plateau.<sup>47</sup>

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>48</sup>

A study of the impact of NCLB on elementary schools found that 44% of all districts nationwide have added time for English language arts and/or math, at the expense of social studies, science, art and music, physical education, recess or lunch. Where these changes have occurred, the magnitude is large, typically amounting to cuts in other subjects of 75 minutes per week or more.<sup>49</sup>

High stakes testing has not produced improvements in educational outcomes. Research shows that:

States that did not have high-stakes graduation exams were more likely to improve average scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) than were states that did have such exams.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, NAEP score gaps between low and high-income students did not narrow.<sup>51</sup>

States without graduation tests were more likely than states with such exams to show improvement on or to improve at a faster rate on a variety of tests, including the NAEP, the SAT and the ACT.<sup>52</sup>

High-stakes testing was not associated with improved scores but was associated with higher dropout rates.<sup>53</sup>

### What Is It?

Race to the Top (RTT) is a \$4.3 billion federal competitive grant program that, according to the U.S. Department of Education, advances reforms around four specific areas:

- Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy;
- Building data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction;
- Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most; and
- Turning around our lowest-achieving schools.

### An Emphasis on Standardized Testing to Evaluate Students, Teachers and Principals

States will be judged on 19 education reform criteria, from how friendly their school climates are to whether they cut state K-12 funding this year. But only two criteria would be absolute requirements: States must have been approved by the Education Department for stabilization funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and states must not have any laws in place barring the use of student-achievement data for evaluating teachers and principals.<sup>54</sup>

### Some Pitfalls of RTT Evaluation Standards

#### **Merit Pay for Teachers**

Independent researchers have found that evaluating and paying teachers for test scores is either damaging or irrelevant to improved learning . . . Paying for higher test scores results in score inflation, not genuine learning. Researchers have extensively documented test score inflation under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and similar state programs (Koretz, 2009; Madaus, Russell & Higgins, 2009; Nichols & Berliner, 2007).<sup>55</sup>

For the \$300 million spent on merit pay for teachers over the last three years, Texas was hoping for a big boost in student achievement. But it didn't happen with the now-defunct program, according to experts hired by the state. The Texas Educator Excellence Grant, or TEEG, plan did not produce the academic improvements that proponents – including Gov. Rick Perry – hoped for when the program was launched with much fanfare in 2006, a new report from the National Center on Performance Incentives said. “There is no systematic evidence that TEEG had an impact on student achievement gains,” said researchers for Texas A&M University, Vanderbilt University and the University of Missouri.<sup>56</sup>

### **English Language Learners**

The (RTT) grant criteria would place an undue reliance on standardized tests that offer, at best, a blurry snapshot of student progress. For English Language Learners (ELLs) in particular, such tests are rarely valid or reliable. Because ELL students cannot fully show what they have learned when assessed in a language they have yet to master, their scores typically lag far behind those of English-proficient peers. It is also well established that ELL children's progress in speaking, comprehending, reading and writing English is never a straight-line trajectory. If teachers are penalized for an “achievement gap” over which they have no control, many may be dissuaded from teaching students who are not proficient in English.<sup>57</sup>

Much has been said about how No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top are tools to help close the achievement gap between students from low- and high- income families and between African American and Latino students and Caucasian students. However, there is little research that substantiates these claims and the excess pressure to take AP classes, do hours of homework and receive tutoring may actually be deepening divides.

Congressman Russ Feingold of Wisconsin commissioned a study by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) on the impact of No Child Left Behind. His conclusion from the report was that:

*No Child Left Behind Law's one-size-fits-all approach and heavy focus on high-stakes testing is causing problems in schools, particularly schools that serve our most disadvantaged students. The study (by the GAO) found that problematic teaching practices like teaching to the test and spending more time on test preparation are happening more frequently in high-poverty and high-minority schools, many of which already have less access to high-quality teachers and resources than more affluent schools. While responsible testing is an important part of measuring achievement and holding schools accountable, it should not come at the expense of providing students a well-rounded education that prepares them for success later in life.<sup>58</sup>*

### The High Cost of a Competitive College Application

Some parents/guardians spend extraordinary amounts of money to ensure that their children have a competitive college application. College coaches can cost between \$1,500 and \$40,000 depending on the services they provide.<sup>59</sup> SAT prep can cost \$150.00 an hour. Additionally, many parents pay for tutoring for specific courses to bring up their children's grades. Any of these options are virtually impossible for lower income families, creating additional advantages for students from more economically privileged backgrounds.

## The Time Gap

Homework for high school students can reach five hours per night. If a student spends seven hours in school, an hour commuting, and one-to-two hours in after-school activities, add five hours of homework and you have a 13-hour day. If a student gets eight hours of sleep that leaves only two hours for morning routines, an evening meal and downtime. But what if a student has a job or has to take care of younger siblings after school? Chances are that less time will be spent on homework and the student will likely be penalized for handing in homework that is not up to a teacher's standards. In this case, a perhaps well-meaning – but not well thought-out – strategy to increase student learning has a negative affect on those with the least time and resources.

### Stress and Young People

Stress damages virtually every kind of cognition that exists, including memory and executive function, motor skills, immune response and ability to sleep.<sup>60</sup>

Children are frequent victims of stress because they are often unable to communicate their feelings accurately. Certain physical symptoms, notably repeated abdominal pain without a known cause, may be indicators of stress in children.<sup>61</sup>

A field study and laboratory tests support the notion that excessive stress is harmful to students' performance.<sup>62</sup>

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), typical schoolchildren today report more anxiety than did child psychiatric patients in the 1950's.<sup>63</sup>

9-13 year olds said they were more stressed by academics than any other stressor—even bullying or family problems.<sup>64</sup>

A study of children who grew up in poverty showed a link between the amount of stress children experienced and impaired cognitive development.<sup>65</sup>

### Sleep Deprivation

Children between the ages of five and twelve need 10-11 hours of sleep each night.<sup>66</sup>

Teens need an average of 9.25 hours of sleep each night.<sup>67</sup>

A majority of adolescents get an average of seven hours of sleep per night, and one-quarter get six hours or less.<sup>68</sup>

Insufficient sleep has been shown to cause difficulties in school, including disciplinary problems, sleepiness in class and poor concentration.<sup>69</sup>

Approximately 80 percent of teens don't get the recommended amount of sleep; at least 15 percent fall asleep in school.<sup>70</sup>

Sleep deprivation impacts cognitive functioning and increases the risk of depression, obesity and suicide.<sup>71</sup>

Early morning sleepiness in teens may be due to their circadian rhythms. Students who attend schools with later start times report less depression, their teachers report that the students are more alert and their parents report that their teens have improved moods.<sup>72</sup>

## Depression and Suicide

The number of 7 to 17 year olds who visited the doctor for depression more than doubled from 1995 to 2002, when 3.22 million children were treated.<sup>73</sup>

Over 25% of adolescents have felt sad or depressed every day for 2 or more weeks at least once during a year's time.<sup>74</sup>

Depression in adolescence comes at a time of great personal change-when boys and girls are forming an identity distinct from their parents, grappling with gender issues and emerging sexuality, and making decisions for the first time in their lives. Depression in adolescence frequently co-occurs with other disorders such as anxiety, disruptive behavior, eating disorders or substance abuse. It can also lead to increased risk for suicide.<sup>75</sup>

Before puberty, boys and girls are equally likely to develop depressive disorders. By age 15, however, girls are twice as likely as boys to have experienced a major depressive episode.<sup>76</sup> Girls from suburban, wealthier communities are three times as likely to suffer from depression as compared with other adolescent girls.<sup>77</sup>

A nationwide survey of youth in grades 9-12 in public and private schools in the United States (U.S.) found that 15% of students reported seriously considering suicide, 11% reported creating a plan, and 7% reported trying to take their own life in the 12 months preceding the survey.<sup>78</sup>

Suicide is the third leading cause of death for 15-24 year olds.<sup>79</sup>

Latino youth<sup>80</sup> and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth<sup>81</sup> are more likely than their peers to attempt suicide.

## Symptoms of Depression

This chart helps clarify some of the common symptoms of depression.<sup>82</sup>

<b>Category</b>	<b>Symptoms</b>
Affective	Anxiety, depressed mood, irritable, morning depression worse than later in the day
Motivational	Loss of interest in activities, hopeless, helpless, suicidal thoughts or acts
Cognitive	Difficulty concentrating, worthlessness, guilt, low self-esteem, memory problems, difficulty with problem-solving
Behavioral	Isolated, easily angered or agitated, oppositional, risk-taking
Vegetative	Sleep problems, appetite change, weight change, energy loss, motor agitation
Somatic	Physical complaints, frequent stomachaches and headaches, body pains

The following chart shows risk and protective factors related to suicide and youth.<sup>83</sup>

<b>Key Context</b>	<b>Predisposing Factors</b>	<b>Contributing Factors</b>	<b>Precipitating Factors</b>	<b>Protective Factors</b>
<b>Individual</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Previous suicide attempt</li> <li>Depression or other mental disorder (e.g., substance use disorder, anxiety, bipolar disorder, conduct disorder)</li> <li>Hopelessness</li> <li>Current suicidal thoughts/wish to die</li> <li>History of childhood neglect, sexual or physical abuse</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rigid cognitive style</li> <li>Poor coping skills</li> <li>Substance misuse</li> <li>Gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender sexual orientation</li> <li>Impulsivity</li> <li>Aggression</li> <li>Hypersensitivity/anxiety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Loss</li> <li>Personal failure</li> <li>Humiliation</li> <li>Individual trauma</li> <li>Health crisis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual coping and problem-solving skills</li> <li>Willingness to seek help</li> <li>Good physical &amp; mental health</li> <li>Experience/feelings of competence</li> <li>Strong cultural identity and spiritual beliefs</li> </ul>
<b>Family</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family history of suicidal behavior/suicide</li> <li>Family history of mental disorder</li> <li>Family history of child maltreatment</li> <li>Early childhood loss/separation or deprivation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family discord</li> <li>Punitive parenting</li> <li>Impaired parent-child relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Loss of significant family member</li> <li>Death of a family member, especially by suicide</li> <li>Recent conflict</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family cohesion &amp; warmth</li> <li>Positive parent-child connection</li> <li>Adults modeling healthy adjustment</li> <li>Active parental supervision</li> <li>High &amp; realistic expectations</li> </ul>
<b>Peer</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social isolation &amp; alienation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Negative youth attitudes toward seeking adult assistance</li> <li>Poor peer relationships</li> <li>Peer modeling of suicidal behaviors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teasing/cruelty/bullying</li> <li>Interpersonal loss of conflict</li> <li>Rejection</li> <li>Peer death, especially by suicide</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social competence</li> <li>Healthy peer modeling</li> <li>Peer acceptance &amp; support</li> </ul>
<b>School</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Long-standing history of negative school experience</li> <li>Lack of meaningful connection to school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reluctance/uncertainty about how to help among school staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Failure</li> <li>Expulsion</li> <li>Disciplinary crisis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Success at school</li> <li>Interpersonal connectedness/belonging</li> </ul>
<b>Community</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multiple suicides</li> <li>Community marginalization</li> <li>Political disenfranchisement</li> <li>Socioeconomic deprivation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sensational media portrayal of suicide</li> <li>Access to firearms or other lethal methods</li> <li>Reluctance/uncertainty about how to help among key gatekeepers</li> <li>Inaccessible community resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High profile/celebrity death, especially by suicide</li> <li>Conflict with the law/incarceration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opportunities for youth participation</li> <li>Availability of resources</li> <li>Community control over local services</li> <li>Cultural/spiritual beliefs against suicide</li> </ul>

Developed by Jennifer White, Ed.D

## For Parents: If you think your child may be depressed or suicidal

There are many resources to support you and your child. Below are some tips for talking to a depressed teen from Helpguide.org. ([http://helpguide.org/mental/depression\\_teen.html](http://helpguide.org/mental/depression_teen.html)). The website includes information about recognizing and treating depression and other mental health issues. Consider the tips below for communicating with your child. Remember that even with your best efforts to communicate, your child may want to talk with another adult about his or her concerns. Consider a social worker or counselor at your school, a private therapist, and/or another trusted adult or family member.

### TIPS FOR TALKING TO A DEPRESSED TEEN

Offer support	Let depressed teenagers know that you're there for them, fully and unconditionally. Hold back from asking a lot of questions (teenagers don't like to feel patronized or crowded), but make it clear that you're ready and willing to provide whatever support they need.
Be gentle but persistent	Don't give up if your adolescent shuts you out at first. Talking about depression can be very tough for teens. Be respectful of your child's comfort level while still emphasizing your concern and willingness to listen.
Listen without lecturing	Resist any urge to criticize or pass judgment once your teenager begins to talk. The important thing is that your child is communicating. Avoid offering unsolicited advice or ultimatums as well.
Validate feelings	Don't try to talk teens out of their depression, even if their feelings or concerns appear silly or irrational to you. Simply acknowledge the pain and sadness they are feeling. If you don't, they will feel like you don't take their emotions seriously.

There are also national and local hotlines including the 24-hour suicide prevention and support hotline: National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK.

The Inspire Foundation (<http://www.inspire.org>) combines technology with direct involvement of young people to deliver innovative and practical online programs that prevent youth suicide and improve young people's mental health and well-being. The mission is to help millions of young people lead happier lives. The organization's work is backed by research and evaluation. Reach Out (<http://us.reachout.com/>) is their web-based initiative that offers information, support and resources to help

young people improve their understanding of mental health issues, develop resilience, and increase their coping skills and help-seeking behavior. The services provided are anonymous and help is available 24 hours a day.

You may also ask your child if he or she would like to speak to a mental health care provider and remind your teen that these conversations are confidential.

### What is resilience?

Resilience is a process not a trait. Resilience is the ability everyone possesses for successful adaptation and healthy development in the face of trauma, adversity and stress.

### Why is it so important?

Many schools have become high-risk environments creating and promoting exorbitant and unacceptable amounts of stress for students, teachers and parents. High-stakes testing, homework demands, college acceptances and peer group pressures contribute to the stress of students. Teacher evaluations, merit pay and career opportunities based on student performance on high-stakes tests, curriculum demands, limited resources and subpar working conditions contribute to the stress on teachers. Homework issues, parenting pressures, and lack of accessibility and voice in school decisions contribute to the stress on parents. Until these issues are addressed “head-on,” all stakeholders in education – parents, teachers, students, administrators and policy makers – have a responsibility to foster environments that support students’ resilience.

### How does it work?

All individuals have basic human needs such as safety, love, belonging, meaning and accomplishment. Environmental conditions play a role in whether these needs are met. Longitudinal developmental research identifies three protective factors that when present together in any environment can buffer and protect against the negative effects of trauma, adversity and stress. The factors are: 1) authentic caring relationships; 2) developmentally appropriate high expectations; and 3) meaningful opportunities to participate. Why? Because when authentic caring relationships are present, developmentally appropriate high expectations are communicated, and meaningful opportunities to participate and contribute are offered, students’ needs are met, their strengths and competencies are promoted and their successful and healthy school and life outcomes are realized.

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### Are high expectations responsible for excessive levels of stress?

If unreasonably high expectations are imposed – then yes. If high expectations are developmentally appropriate and are communicated to inspire – then no.

### What's the difference?

Unreasonably high expectations are those that pressure students to perform in ways that are not appropriate. Too often teachers, parents, colleges, and coaches impose their demands of grades and performance on students without any regard for the student or the context. Not being able to possibly meet these inappropriately high expectations creates toxic stress and painful disappointment that contribute to the depression, disengagement, suicide and risk-taking behaviors we see in too many of our students.

Communicating appropriately high expectations that inspire are those where we communicate to students that they have the capacity to set high expectations for themselves. These high expectations are youth-centered based on the dreams, hopes, strengths and interests of the youth – not on what the adults want from the youth. Furthermore, these appropriately high expectations are related to behaviors, attitudes and beliefs where students take pride and are motivated to continually learn, demonstrate effort, persevere, set goals and progress academically, socially, emotionally, physically and spiritually.

### How can I support the resilience of youth?

The place to begin building resilience is by believing and recognizing that resilience is a capacity we all have. We can look at how we communicate and think about how we talk to children. Does our language focus on strengths rather than deficits? How about our body language? Are we approachable? Do we actively listen when young people are talking to us? Do we give them positive reinforcement and validate their feelings often enough? Do we make the effort to “check-in” with a young person who appears sad or troubled and simply tell them that we are there for them should they need to talk? We need to consciously think about how we react and respond to our youth.

We also need to remember, “our behavior speaks louder than words.” We know that young people closely observe our behavior including how we manage our everyday stress and crises. As adults, we are in a great position to be role models and to develop positive and supportive relationships with children and youth,

encourage their strengths, and provide opportunities for meaningful participation that acknowledges their contributions. We can also admit that we sometimes feel frustrated or overwhelmed with a situation. In these cases we can ask our children and/or colleagues for support and feedback so that we don't forget to foster our own resilience.

**Let's get specific — what does promoting resilience and the three protective factors really look like?**

The following lists provide examples of what authentic caring relationships, appropriately high expectations, and meaningful opportunities to participate and contribute look like for each environment—home, school and community. All these simple, yet powerful, actions promote resilience and encourage the young people we work with to recognize the natural capacity for resilience that they possess within themselves.

## PROTECTIVE FACTORS\*

### SAMPLE OF FAMILY PROTECTIVE FACTORS

#### Caring and Support

- Is available and responsive
- Actively listens, pays personalized attention and shows interest
- Creates one-to-one time
- Checks in often
- Accepts child for who s/he is – not what parent wants him/her to be
- Communicates unconditional love
- Gets to know hopes and dreams
- Laughs, plays, smiles and uses humor
- Shows respect for and acknowledges child's feelings
- Encourages connections to other caring adults

#### High Expectations

- Models and teaches that mistakes and setbacks are opportunities for growth
- Helps child understand what s/he can and cannot control
- Helps to reframe problems into opportunities
- Encourages self-awareness of moods and thinking
- Recognizes strengths and special interests
- Uses strengths and interests to address concerns/problems
- Focuses on meeting needs of whole child (social, emotional, cognitive, physical, spiritual)
- Conveys optimism and hope
- Understands the needs motivating child's behavior
- Advocates for child at school and elsewhere

#### Participation and Contribution

- Gives child voice
- Gives child opportunity to make amends for mistakes and misbehavior
- Models and provides opportunities for planning
- Models and provides opportunities for problem-solving
- Models and provides opportunities for decision-making
- Makes time for personal reflection and dialogue/discussion
- Creates opportunities for creative expression
- Aims to meet developmental needs for power/autonomy and meaning
- Provides opportunities for child to help others in home, school, community
- Provides opportunities for child to develop, use and contribute his or her strengths and interests

\* Adapted from: Benard, B. (2004). *Resiliency: What we have learned*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

## SAMPLE OF SCHOOL PROTECTIVE FACTORS

### Caring and Support

- Creates and sustains a caring climate
- Is available and responsive
- Actively listens/gives voice
- Pays personalized attention
- Checks-in and shows interest
- Gets to know hopes, dreams and interests
- Shows respect for and acknowledges students' feelings
- Is flexible
- Creates connections to resources – educational, health, cultural, etc.
- Gets to know life context

### High Expectations

- Models and teaches that mistakes and setbacks are opportunities for learning
- Sees students as vital partners in school improvement
- Connects learning to students' interests, strengths, experiences, dreams and goals
- Encourages creativity and imagination
- Sees students as constructors of own knowledge and meaning
- Helps family members see students' strengths, interests, dreams and goals
- Conveys messages to students that they are resilient
- Conveys optimism and hope
- Uses a variety of instructional strategies to tap multiple intelligences
- Helps to reframe self-image from "at-risk" to "at-promise"
- Groups students heterogeneously

### Participation and Contribution

- Practices equity and inclusion
- Provides ongoing opportunities for dialogue/discussion
- Creates opportunities for creative expression
- Infuses communication skills into all learning experiences
- Gives youth meaningful roles and responsibilities
- Provides opportunities for planning and decision-making
- Infuses active learning into the program
- Uses small, interest-based groups
- Uses cooperative learning and group process
- Holds regular and as-needed class meetings

## SAMPLE OF COMMUNITY PROTECTIVE FACTORS

### Caring and Support

- Is available and responsive
- Shows common courtesy
- Pays personalized attention
- Provides long-term commitment
- Respects young people
- Uses appropriate self-disclosure
- Names and accepts young people's feelings
- Conveys fundamental positive regard
- Shows patience
- Creates connections to resources

### High Expectations

- Sees youth as vital partners in improving community
- Focuses on meeting needs of whole child (social, emotional, cognitive, physical, spiritual)
- Helps to reframe problems into opportunities
- Sees culture as an asset
- Believes that young people are a community resource
- Understands the needs motivating young people's behavior and learning
- Encourages creativity and imagination
- Encourages self-awareness of moods and thinking
- Helps family and school recognize youth's strengths, interests, dreams and goals
- Groups youth heterogeneously

### Participation/Contribution

- Builds a democratic, inclusive community
- Provides opportunities for planning, decision-making and problem-solving
- Empowers youth to help create organization's rules
- Gives youth meaningful roles and responsibilities
- Provides opportunities for personal reflection
- Provides opportunities for adventure/play/outdoor experiences
- Engages youth in a program/organization/community improvement task force
- Includes and engages marginalized groups
- Creates opportunities for creative expression
- Creates collaborative partnerships with youth, family, school and other community members

### Cheating

According to a survey of 24,000 high school students in grades 9-12, 95 percent of students say they've cheated during the course of their education, ranging from letting somebody copy their homework to cheating on tests. 64 percent of students report one or more instances of serious cheating – cheating which includes copying from someone else, helping someone else cheat on a test, or using crib sheets or cheat notes.<sup>84</sup>

Cheating is more common when students experience the academic tasks they've been given as boring, irrelevant or overwhelming.<sup>85</sup>

When students perceive that the ultimate goal of learning is to get good grades, they are more likely to see cheating as an acceptable, justifiable behavior.<sup>86</sup>

According to research by the Josephson Institute, cheating is higher among *college-bound* kids than any other group.<sup>87</sup>

Students interviewed by CNN report that they see cheating as the only way to maintain good grades. One student asserted, “We students know that the fact is we are almost completely judged on our grades. They are so important that we will sacrifice our own integrity to make a good impression.”<sup>88</sup>

When students have an extrinsic reason for performing, the internal motivation to learn is diminished. Research shows that there is increased motivation to cheat in middle school because of the emphasis on grades.<sup>89</sup>

### Disengagement

In a national survey, students were asked to use 3 words to describe how they felt in school. The word most often used by students was “bored” followed by “tired”.<sup>90</sup>

Our test and achievement driven education system contributes to higher drop-out rates and rates of burn-out.<sup>91</sup>

Teens reported being bored 27% of the time that they are in class and disengaged 75% of the time.<sup>92</sup>

## Play and Downtime

Unstructured play and downtime enhances brain development and learning.<sup>93</sup>

Children used to play for hours each day, burning calories and keeping fit and healthy. At the same time, play helped them socialize with others, develop mental acuity and reduce stress. Physical activity and free play are essential to maintaining cognitive, physical, social and emotional development and well-being. Play enhances self-regulation, empathy and group management skills.<sup>94</sup>

Between 1981 and 1997, children lost 12 hours of weekly free time while time spent in structured sports doubled. Time spent on homework increased by 50 percent.<sup>95</sup>

The researcher Alicia Dubroc has questioned whether elimination of recess in schools is a violation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children, which guarantees children the right to play and the right to take breaks, very similar to how the United States Department of Labor ensures workers in this country the right to have breaks in the work day.<sup>96</sup>

## Physical Health

Recurrent symptoms for which no organic etiology can be found are common among adolescents. Headache, chest and abdominal pain and chronic fatigue are some of the more frequently reported functional or "psychosomatic" symptoms.<sup>97</sup>

## Remediation Rates in College and College Graduation

42 percent of community college freshman and 20 percent of freshmen in four-year institutions have to take remedial classes.<sup>98</sup>

While 2.8 million students enroll in some form of higher education each year, most do not proceed straight through to graduation. Only one in five of those who enroll in two-year institutions earn an associate degree within three years, and only two in five of those who start four-year colleges complete their degrees within six years.<sup>99</sup>

## Tutoring and Testing

Tutoring and test preparation is a \$4 billion industry.<sup>100</sup>

Under No Child Left Behind, students enrolled in schools judged to be failing are entitled to free tutoring, paid for by taxpayers. The costs total \$2.5 billion annually, according to U.S. News and World Report.<sup>101</sup>

The College Board, which owns the SAT, PSAT and other tests, plans to introduce an eighth-grade college assessment exam.<sup>102</sup>

## Use and Abuse of Drugs

The number of pre-schoolers being prescribed Ritalin, Adderall and other medications for ADHD has more than doubled in the past decade. Yet the drug is not FDA approved for use in children under the age of six.<sup>103</sup>

From between 1998 to 2005, calls related to adolescent abuse of prescription ADHD medication rose 76% (from 330 to 581 per year), which is higher than calls for victims of substance abuse in general (59%) and for teen substance abuse specifically (55%). During the same time, prescriptions for ADHD medications written for 10-19 year-olds rose 86% (from 4.2 million to 7.8 million), and those for 3-19-year-olds increased 80% (from 6.5 million to 11.8 million). In addition, estimated prescriptions for teens and pre-teens increased 133% for amphetamine products, 52% for methylphenidate products and 80% for both products together.<sup>104</sup>

Youth who take ADHD medications without a prescription report that they use the drugs to help them focus on school work and to lose weight.<sup>105</sup>

Suburban youth are more likely to report using drugs and alcohol to self-medicate (to decrease feelings of stress and depression) compared to urban youth populations.<sup>106</sup>

23% of college students have alcohol substance abuse problems.<sup>107</sup>

Children who consistently have dinner with their parents are less likely to smoke, drink or use drugs.<sup>108</sup>

## Physical Injuries

Sports injuries are on the rise in U.S. children and teenagers. Each year, more than 3.5 million sports-related injuries requiring medical treatment occur in children under age 15. Muscle overuse is responsible for about half of the sports injuries that occur in middle school and high school students. Overuse injuries usually occur over time with prolonged, repeated motion or impact. They range from chronic muscle strains and tendonitis to stress fractures (tiny cracks in the bone).<sup>109</sup>

Six out of 10 students, ages 9 to 20, reported chronic back pain related to heavy backpacks. Among students who carried backpacks weighing 15% of their body weight or less, only 2 in 10 reported pain.<sup>110</sup>

## END NOTES: PART EIGHT

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## PART NINE: RESOURCES AND LINKS

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- 1 Links to Websites and Organizations
- 2 Recommended Books

### The College Application Process

**Colleges that Change Lives** (<http://www.ctcl.org/>)

Colleges That Change Lives, Inc. (CTCL) is a non-profit organization dedicated to the advancement and support of a student-centered college search process. CTCL supports 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.

**Education Conservancy** (<http://www.educationconservancy.org/>) The Education Conservancy (EC) is a non-profit organization 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.

### Health Information for Parents, Guardians, Educators and Youth

**Kids Health** (<http://kidshealth.org/>) Kids Health provides information about health, behavior and development from before birth through the teen years. It is sponsored by Nemours, one of the largest nonprofit organizations devoted to children's health.

**Mental Health America** (<http://www.nmha.org/>) Mental Health America (formerly known as the National Mental Health Association) is a non-profit with 320 affiliates nationwide representing a growing movement of Americans who promote mental wellness for the health and well-being of the nation – everyday

and in times of crisis. Their website includes fact sheets for youth and families about topics such as back to school tips and your child's mental health. It also includes fact sheets about bullying, depression and suicide.

**Reach Out** (<http://us.reachout.com/>) The Inspire Foundation combines technology with direct involvement of young people to deliver innovative and practical online programs that prevent youth suicide and improve young people's mental health and well-being. The mission is to help millions of young people lead happier lives. The organization's work is backed by research and evaluation. Reach Out is its web-based initiative that offers information, support and resources to help young people improve their understanding of mental health issues, develop resilience and increase their coping skills and help-seeking behavior. The services provided are anonymous and help is available 24 hours a day.

### Homework, Standardized Testing and Teaching the Whole Child

**Alliance for Childhood** (<http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/>) The Alliance for Childhood promotes policies and practices that support children's healthy development, love of learning and joy in living. The organization's campaigns bring to light both the promise and the vulnerability of childhood.

**BAM Radio** ([www.bamradionetwork.com](http://www.bamradionetwork.com)) "BAM!" is an acronym for "body and mind" and was conceived in 2007 to draw attention to the need for a healthy mind and a healthy body for each developing child. BAM Radio is the largest education radio network in the world offering programming from the nations' top thinkers and leaders around education. It reaches out to parents, educators, and school directors to encourage looking at a holistic education approach.

**Challenge Success** (<http://www.challengesuccess.org>) Challenge Success endorses a vision of success that emphasizes character, health, independence, connection, creativity, enthusiasm *and* achievement. Its mission is to inform, inspire and equip youth, parents and schools to adopt practices that expand options for youth success.

**The Coalition for a Better Education** ([http://www.thecebe.org/Pages/opt\\_out.html](http://www.thecebe.org/Pages/opt_out.html)) The Coalition for a Better Education is a group of educators and parents in Colorado working to eliminate state-wide standardized testing in Colorado and certain aspects of No Child Left Behind.

**East Bay Homework Blog** (<http://eastbayhomework.blogspot.com>) The East Bay Homework Blog is the blog of Kerry Dickinson, a parent, teacher and advisor to the film. She writes on topics relating to education, parenting and homework.

**Edutopia** (<http://www.edutopia.org>) Edutopia was founded by the George Lucas Educational Foundation and is a place where children and parents, teachers and administrators, policy makers and the people they serve are empowered to change education for the better. Visit the site to discover the latest practical, hands-on advice and real world examples for developing lifelong learners and the skills needed to succeed in the 21st century.

**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.

**The Institute for Language and Education Policy** (<http://www.elladvocates.org>) The Institute for Language and Education Policy is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting research-based policies in serving English and heritage language learners. The Institute critiques misguided “accountability” measures, high-stakes testing, cutbacks in school funding and English-only activism.

**Stop Homework** ([www.stophomework.com](http://www.stophomework.com)) Stop Homework is a resource created by 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.

**Susan Ohanian** (<http://www.susanohanian.org>) Susan Ohanian, a longtime teacher, maintains this site reflecting the leadership role she has taken in opposing NCLB, high-stakes testing and the resulting test-driven curriculum.

**Whole Child Education** (<http://www.ascd.org>) ASCD works to bring parents, educators, policy makers and communities together to ensure children are prepared for adulthood. This group is advocating for development of children who are healthy, safe, engaged, supported and challenged. This is a wonderful resource for those interested in advocating for change in education that emphasizes the whole child.

## Progressive Education

**The Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO)** (<http://www.education-revolution.org>) AERO’s goal is to advance student-driven, learner-centered approaches to education. AERO makes connections with international educational alternatives including Montessori, Waldorf (Steiner), Public Choice and At-Risk, Democratic, Homeschool, Open, Charter, Free, Sudbury, Holistic, Virtual, Magnet, Early Childhood, Reggio Emilia, Indigo, Krishnamurti, Quaker, Libertarian, Independent, Progressive, Community, Cooperative and

Unschooling. One of AERO's areas of expertise is democratic process and democratic education.

**American Educational Research Association (AERA)** ([www.aera.net](http://www.aera.net)) AERA is the most prominent international professional organization concerned with improving the educational process by encouraging scholarly inquiry related to education and evaluation and by promoting the dissemination and practical application of research results with the primary goal of advancing educational research and its practical application. Its more than 25,000 members are educators, administrators, directors of research, persons working with testing or evaluation in federal, state and local agencies, counselors, evaluators, graduate students and behavioral scientists.

**Big Picture Learning** (<http://www.bigpicture.org>) Big Picture Learning's mission is to lead vital changes in education by generating and sustaining innovative, personalized schools that work in tandem with the real world of the greater community. Big Picture students work in their communities with volunteer mentors and are not evaluated solely on the basis of standardized tests. Students are assessed on their performance on exhibitions and demonstrations of achievement, on motivation and on the habits of mind, hand, heart, and behavior that they display.

**Center on Education Policy** ([www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org)) The Center on Education Policy is a national, independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center helps Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy, the need to improve the academic quality of public schools, to make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education, and create the conditions that will lead to better public schools.

**The Coalition of Essential Schools (CES)** (<http://www.essentialschools.org>) The CES network includes hundreds of schools and more than two-dozen Affiliate Centers. Diverse in size, population and programmatic emphasis, Essential Schools serve students from pre-kindergarten through high school in urban, suburban and rural communities, and they are characterized by personalization, democracy and equity, and intellectual vitality and excellence.

**The Independent Curriculum Group** (<http://www.independentcurriculum.org/>) The Independent Curriculum Group is part of a growing movement of leading college preparatory schools that have de-emphasized curriculum driven by standardized testing.

**Pikler Institute** (<http://www.pikler.org/index.html>) The International Emmi Pikler Foundation at Loczy is guided by the mission of founder Dr. Emmi Pikler to offer aid in raising healthy, happy children. Established in 1946, this internationally recognized agency is dedicated to empowering children and families through outreach programs that serve the child, parent and caregiver.

**Teaching to Change L.A.** (<http://tcla.gseis.ucla.edu/voices/>) Teaching to Change L.A. is an online journal of UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education and Access. Here you will find the work and thought of educators, students, parents and activists who confront critical issues that schools and communities face across greater Los Angeles.

**IDEA** (<http://www.democraticeducation.org/>) The Institute for Democratic Education in America is an organization committed to bridging the disconnect between our democratic values and the way we educate and treat young people. IDEA advances democratic education, or "learning that matters," which supports self-initiative in learning and is directed toward social justice. IDEA showcases what's working in education and trains schools and organizations to model these best practices.

## Resilience

**Raising Resilient Children Foundation** (<http://www.raisingresilientkids.com/>) Disseminates information to assist adults to raise, support and develop stress-hardy children.

**Resilience Research Centre (RRC)** (<http://www.resilienceproject.org/>) The Resilience Research Centre brings together leaders in the field of resilience research from different disciplines and cultural backgrounds. Their partners across six continents employ methodologically diverse approaches to the study of how children, youth and families cope with many different kinds of adversity.

**Resiliency in Action** (<http://www.resiliency.com/>) Resiliency in Action contains general information and research about resilience.

## Sports

**Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA)** (<http://www.positivecoach.org/>) Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA) is transforming youth sports so sports can transform youth. Through partnership with more than 1,100 youth sports organizations, leagues, schools and cities nationwide, PCA has conducted 6,000-plus workshops for youth sports coaches, parents, organizational leaders and athletes.

## Stress Relief

**Just-In-Time Stress Relief (JITSR)** (<http://www.jitsr.com/>) JITSR, a product of Wellness Logic, LLC., started in 2005 to provide subscribers with low-cost access to an effective set of stress management methods and tools. Based on practices proven at The Stanford University School of Medicine, JITSR uses technology to help people develop stress management habits that automatically result in reduced stress and enhanced performance.

**Mindfulness in Education Network** (<http://www.mindfuled.org/>) The Mindfulness in Education Network was established in 2001 by a group of educators and students of Thich Nhat Hanh, Zen Master and peace activist nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The Network sees mindfulness as an antidote to the growing stress, conflict and confusion in educational settings as well as an invaluable gift to give students. The network facilitates communication among all educators, parents, students and any others interested in promoting contemplative practice (mindfulness) in educational settings.

## Suicide Prevention

**American Foundation for Suicide Prevention** (<http://www.afsp.org>) The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention includes a link to its Teen Suicide Prevention Campaign. It lists warning signs and actions that youth and adults can take to help prevent suicide.

**Help Guide** (<http://www.helpguide.org/>) The Help Guide's goal is to provide information and encouragement for youth and adults to make healthy choices. Robert and Jeanne Segal spearheaded the founding of this project in 1999, following the suicide of their daughter, Morgan. They believe that Morgan's tragedy could have been avoided if she had had easy access to supportive health information. Their mission is to honor her memory and compassionate spirit by providing balanced, up-to-date, and motivating information about mental health and lifelong wellness.

**The Jed Foundation** (<http://www.jedfoundation.org>) The Jed Foundation works nationally to reduce the rate of suicide and the prevalence of emotional distress among college and university students. To achieve this end, the organization collaborates with the public and leaders in higher education, mental health, and research to produce and advance initiatives.

**National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center** (<http://www.safeyouth.gov>) The National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center links to a fact sheet about youth suicide including risks and protective factors.

**The Trevor Project** (<http://www.thetrevorproject.org>) The Trevor Project is a National organization focused on crisis and suicide prevention efforts among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth. It operates a nationwide, around-the-clock crisis and suicide prevention helpline for LGBTQ youth. The website includes prevention resources.

**Reach Out** (<http://us.reachout.com/>) The Inspire Foundation combines technology with direct involvement of young people to deliver innovative and practical online programs that prevent youth suicide and improve young people's mental health and well-being. The mission is to help millions of young people lead happier lives. The organization's work is backed by research and evaluation. Reach Out is their web-based initiative that offers information, support and resources to help young people improve their understanding of mental health issues, develop resilience and increase their coping skills and help-seeking behavior. The services provided are anonymous and help is available 24 hours a day.

### Facilitating Community Dialogue

**Everyday Democracy** (Formerly Study Circles) (<http://www.everyday-democracy.org>) Everyday Democracy is an organization whose mission is to help communities develop their own ability to solve problems by exploring ways for all kinds of people to think, talk and work together to create change.

**The Public Conversations Project** (<http://www.publicconversations.org>) The Public Conversations Project is an organization whose mission is to guide, train and inspire individuals, organizations and communities to constructively address conflicts relating to values and worldviews.

**Nanette Asimov**, "Students offer educators easy fixes for combating failure," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 15, 2007. Article about Black and Latino students talking with educators about their views about the achievement gap. <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2007/11/15/BAC6TCFRK.DTL>

### Experts in the film

- 1 *The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What Parents Can Do About It*, Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish
- 2 *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids*, Madeline Levine, Ph.D
- 3 *Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed-Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students*, Denise Clark Pope, Ph.D.
- 4 *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children*, Wendy Mogel, Ph.D.
- 5 *The Blessing of a B Minus: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Resilient Teenagers*, Wendy Mogel, Ph.D.
- 6 *Motivated Minds: Raising Children to Love Learning*, Deborah Stipek, Ph.D and Kathy Seal
- 7 *Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Kids Roots and Wings*, Kenneth R. Ginsburg, MD, MS Ed, FAAP

### College

- 1 *College Unranked: Ending the College Admissions Frenzy*, Lloyd Thacker
- 2 *Colleges that Change Lives: 40 Schools That Will Change the Way You Think About Colleges*, Loren Pope
- 3 *Harvard Schmarvard: Getting Beyond the Ivy League to the College That is Best for You*, Jay Mathews

### Education

- 1 *Tuned in & Fired Up: How Teaching Can Inspire Real Learning in the Classroom*, Sam M. Intrator and Elliot W. Eisner
- 2 *Horace's Hope: What Works for the American High School*, Theodore R.Sizer
- 3 *High Schools on a Human Scale: How Small Schools Can Transform American Education*, Thomas Toch
- 4 *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*, Nel Noddings
- 5 *A Mathematician's Lament: How School Cheats Us Out of Our Most Fascinating and Imaginative Art Form*, Paul Lockhart

- 6 *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes*, Alfie Kohn
- 7 *What Every Great Teacher Knows: Practical Principles for Effective Teaching*, Richard A. Gibboney and Clark D. Webb
- 8 *Reading Together: Everything You Need to Know to Raise a Child Who Loves to Read*, Diane W. Frankenstein
- 9 *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, Diane Ravitch
- 10 *The Art of Harmonious and Cooperative Living*, The Meher Schools
- 11 *Engaging Schools, Committee on Increasing High School Students' Engagement and Motivation to Learn*, National Research Council
- 12 *Learning by Heart*, Roland S. Barth
- 13 *Catching Up or Leading the Way: American Education in the Age of Globalization*, Yong Zhao

### Great Reads About Life

- 1 *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell
- 2 *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell
- 3 *A Whole New Mind*, Daniel H. Pink
- 4 *Spark*, John J. Ratey, MD and Eric Hegerman
- 5 *The Element*, Ken Robinson, Ph.D
- 6 *Drive*, Daniel H. Pink
- 7 *Nurture Shock*, Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman

### Homework

- 1 *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing*, Alfie Kohn
- 2 *The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What Parents Can Do About It*, Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish
- 3 *The Battle Over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents*, Harris M. Cooper
- 4 *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning*, John Buell and Etta Kralovec
- 5 *Rethinking Homework: Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs*, Cathy Vatterott

## Parenting Books

- 1 *Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting*, Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn
- 2 *Unconditional Parenting: Moving From Rewards and Punishment to Love and Reason*, Alfie Kohn
- 3 *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, Dan Kindlon, Ph.D and Michael Thompson, Ph.D
- 4 *Revolution in the Bleachers: How Parents Can Take Back Family in a World Gone Crazy Over Youth Sports*, Regan McMahon
- 5 *A Nation of Wimps: The High Cost of Invasive Parenting*, Hara Estroff Marano
- 6 *Staying Connected to your Teenager: How to Keep Them Talking to You and How to Hear What They're Really Saying*, Michael Riera, Ph.D
- 7 *The Trouble with Boys: A Surprising Report Card on our Sons, Their Problems at School, and What Parents and Educators Must Do*, Peg Tyre
- 8 *The Best Things Parents Do: Ideas & Insights from Real-World Parents*, Susan Isaacs Kohl

## Other Issues in the Film

- 1 *The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need – and What We Can Do About It*, Tony Wagner
- 2 *The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids*, Alexandra Robbins
- 3 *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap*, Dr. Alvin Rosenfeld M.D., Nicole Wise, and Dr. Robert Coles M.D.
- 4 *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon*, David Elkind, Ph.D
- 5 *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*, Richard Louv
- 6 *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D
- 7 *Under Pressure: Rescuing Our Children from the Culture of Hyper-Parenting*, Carl Honore
- 8 *The Triple Bind: Saving Our Teenage Girls from Today's Pressures*, Stephen Hinshaw, Ph.D and Rachel Kranz
- 9 *Power of Play*, David Elkind
- 10 *Catching Up or Leading the Way: American Education in the Age of Globalization*, Yong Zhao
- 11 *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*, Linda Darling Hammond

- 12 *Resiliency: What We Have Learned*, Bonnie Benard
- 13 *Raising Happiness: 10 Simple Steps for More Joyful Kids and Happier Parents*, Christine Carter

## PART TEN: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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## 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 children need today.

Together we can create, support and sustain an educational system that supports ALL children as whole children, makes health a priority, values childhood and better 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, admissions at many colleges ARE changing because of the recognition of 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 children 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 children need to learn how to compete since we live in such a competitive world?**

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

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

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

### **What do other countries do that works?**

First, many countries are seeing some of the same issues in young people as we are here in the U.S. 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 children better study skills and ways to handle stress better?**

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

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.

Children 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 thinking and fosters resilience and coping skills.

We are not advocating zero accountability or suggesting intellectual rigor isn't important. 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 many 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 U.S. 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 children are struggling.

We have to be there to listen to our children 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?

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.

Teachers can start by considering the research on homework, how much time homework takes up (collecting it, checking it, passing it out) and whether a change could help time be used more effectively.

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

### What do you think of our childrens' schedules?

Simply stated: We are asking our children 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 extracurricular 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 extracurriculars 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 extracurriculars 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 teachers’ 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 rewards 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?

- 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
- Consider restructuring the school day
- Make the college search about “fit” instead of the “best name”
- Support alternative opportunities after high school graduation
- Form alliances and advocate for change
- Challenge “teaching to the test”
- Rethink accepted homework practices and policies and AP courses
- Get involved by attending meetings, forming alliances, writing policy makers and adding your voice

### What can parents do today in addition to above?

#### Parents can...

- Talk and listen to kids about their experiences and the stresses they are feeling
- 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
- Restructuring the school day
- 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

PART ELEVEN: BIOGRAPHIES FOR THE WRITERS AND FILM TEAM



## END THE RACE GUIDE TEAM

### **End the Race Guide Co-Author; Race to Nowhere Producer & Co-Director: Vicki Abeles**

Vicki Abeles, an ex-Wall Street lawyer and mother of three, turned filmmaker in 2007 to tackle critical social, political and educational issues that are often ignored by the mass media. She founded Reel Link Films and produced her first feature documentary, *Race to Nowhere*, which hit a nerve with its vivid portrayal of today's education system, focusing on the students who struggle to navigate the harried, pressure-cooker culture that is today's America. Since its premiere at the Mill Valley Film Festival, hundreds of thousands of people have seen the film at screenings across the country and overseas.



In distributing the film, Abeles developed a cutting-edge hybrid model, showing the film in schools, churches and local community venues as well as in commercial theaters. At the same time, Abeles launched a grassroots campaign to build a national consensus around the need to move away from the current quantity-driven, test-centric, one-size fits-all approach in order to transform education, redefine success and achievement for young people and safeguard their health and well-being.

Abeles, who lives in the San Francisco area with her husband and three children, continues to produce short films on issues affecting children, women and families. Other credits include Associate Producer on the recently completed documentary “Miss Representation” and parent facilitator on Edutopia, part of the George Lucas Educational Foundation.

### **End the Race Guide Co-Author: Kim Westheimer**



Kim is an educator, writer and consultant. She works with schools and non-profits on issues related to equity, community dialogue, and program development. She is currently a senior consultant for the Human Rights Campaign's Welcoming Schools Initiative, a comprehensive approach to family diversity, gender stereotypes and bullying in elementary schools. She is also an adjunct faculty member at Wheelock College. Kim is the co-author, with Jeff Perrotti, of *When the Drama Club is Not Enough: Lessons from the Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students* (Beacon, 2001).

**Education Consultant and Co-Author, *End the Race Guide*: Sara Truebridge, Ed.D.**

Sara Truebridge is an Education Consultant who combines her experience and expertise in the areas of education policy, practice and research to promote success and equity for all. She formerly was a Research Associate with WestEd, researching, authoring, and presenting best practices in the field of prevention and resilience as it relates to education, school climate, and youth development theory, policy, and practice.



Sara has consulted and given numerous presentations and workshops throughout the United States from a strengths-based perspective focusing on resilience and positive youth/human development theory, policy and practice to enhance positive school climate, teaching, learning, health, and safety. Sara currently is contracted by Teachers College Press to write a book on resilience, beliefs, and education.

After 20 years of credentialed classroom experience ranging from pre-kindergarten to high school, Sara was Founder and President of Sincerely, Kids Inc.<sup>®</sup>, a child-centered consulting firm providing Educational C.A.R.E. – Consulting, Advocacy, Resources, and Education. Prior to teaching, she was the Legislative Analyst for education in the New York State Senate. Sara earned her Ed.D. and M.A. from Mills College and B.A. from Denison University. She holds certificates from Harvard Graduate School of Education's program, Closing the Achievement Gap and UC Berkeley's program, Children and the Changing Family. Sara is one of two international recipients of the 2005 Howard M. Soule Fellowship for Doctoral Studies: a Phi Delta Kappa Graduate Fellowship in Educational Leadership.

**Contributing Writer, *End the Race Guide*: Sara Bennett**



Sara is the co-author of *The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It* and the founder of Stop Homework, a not-for-profit project devoted to changing homework policy and practice, that is affiliated with The Alliance for Childhood. Sara has a 19-year-old son and a 16-year-old daughter, and she has been an anti-homework activist from the time her older child entered first grade. A former criminal appeals attorney and the first chairperson of the Wrongful Convictions Project of the Legal Aid Society, Sara has successfully helped parents advocate for homework reform in their own communities, and she has counseled teachers, administrators, and School Board members on ways to change homework practices.

### Contributing Writer, *End the Race Guide*: Kerry Dickinson

Kerry has a K-12 teaching credential and a master's degree in Reading. She has been a substitute teacher in her children's public school district. Kerry has taught middle school, high school and community college English and Reading. She has volunteered in her children's school district for many years and recently served on the committee that rewrote the district's homework policy. She is an advocate for change in her community with regard to homework practices and writes and edits articles on homework and related educational and parenting issues. She created the blog East Bay Homework Blog.



## THE RACE TO NOWHERE FILM TEAM

### Editor and Co-Director, Jessica Congdon



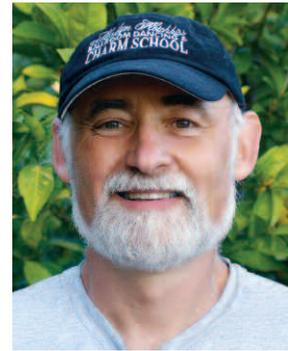
Jessica has worked as a commercial and film editor for the last 11 years. She is currently working on the documentary film *Miss Representation*. She recently completed a 9-spot campaign for Nokia with Weiden & Kennedy in London. She co-edited the documentary *Motherland*, which premiered at SXSW 2009. Her documentary feature film *Speed and Angels* has been in festivals across the country and is featured on Delta airline flights.

The feature film *Her Minor Thing*, directed by Charlie Matthau, premiered at the Seattle Film Festival in 2005. Prior to that she edited the feature film *Dopamine*, directed by Mark Decena, an award-winning film released through Sundance Films. She edited the international productions *Sök (Search)* in Stockholm, and the Columbia Tri-Star feature film *Big Girls Don't Cry* in Berlin. Other documentary work includes *Radius of a Bomb: A Bosnian Diary*, a documentary short.

As a commercial editor, Jessica has edited music videos and national and international television campaigns for clients including Bugaboo, Hilton, Hitachi, Budweiser, Isuzu, Nike, Saturn, Pepsi, Procter & Gamble, and Adidas. The NBC11 "Illuminating" campaign, directed by Ron Fricke, won an Emmy in 2005.

### Mark Adler, Composer

Composer Mark Adler's recent projects include *Food, Inc.* produced by Robert Kenner and Eric Schlosser, and *Bottle Shock*, starring Alan Rickman and Chris Pine. He won a Primetime Emmy for his work on HBO's *The Rat Pack* and was nominated for *Forbidden Territory: Stanley's Search for Livingstone*, starring Nigel Hawthorne. Other projects include scores for over 40 documentaries (including numerous National Geographic Specials) and numerous TV movies (among them two for Hallmark Hall of Fame). He also composed the theme for the PBS series, *American Experience*. Feature film scores include Paramount Classics' *Focus* based on Arthur Miller's novel and starring William H. Macy and Laura Dern, the Miramax film *Picture Bride*, Wayne Wang's *Eat A Bowl of Tea* and three Oscar-nominated feature documentaries. Mark attended elementary school in Mill Valley, where he first fell in love with movies at the Sequoia Theater.



### Consulting Director/Cinematographer: Sophia Constantinou



Sophia's work has earned international acclaim for tackling difficult topics with artistry and sensitivity. She has produced, directed and photographed several award-winning documentaries, including *Divided Loyalties*, an intensely personal, feature-length exploration of the conflict in Cyprus (Golden Gate Award, 1999); *Between the Lines*, about women and self-injury (Golden Gate Award, 1998); and *Impact Zone* (Best Experimental Film, NY Underground Film Festival, 1997.)

Specializing in alluring, formally dramatic lighting design as well as improvised observational camerawork, Sophia has been shooting high-profile documentary films for over a decade. Her cinematography credits include HBO's *Unchained Memories*, PBS' *Presumed Guilty*, and KQED'S Emmy Award winning *Home Front*. She received her BA in Film Studies from the University of California at Berkeley and a Master's from San Francisco State University. She teaches cinematography and directing at the City College of San Francisco and has been mentoring at-risk youth in filmmaking and cinematography for much of the past decade.

### Writer/Cinematographer: Maimone Attia

Drawn to storytelling since he was 7, Maimone Attia studied creative writing, film production and critical studies at USC, from which he received a B.A. in Cinema-Television. He now works as a children's entertainer, freelance videographer, and writer.

As an event videographer, Maimone shoots weddings, bar/bat mitzvahs, festivals, and other types of events. His Children's Entertainment, *Adventures*, is theatrical, interactive, live mystery-solving for young children, involving a combination of acting, storytelling, sound and video.

Maimone writes, shoots, directs and edits short films independently. His narrative films are expressionistic stories, often psychological thrillers that use fantasy as a metaphor for complex emotional states. In *Race to Nowhere* he sought to bring his training in narrative film making to the world of documentary film.

