

Lost education? (revised and added to)

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With summer winding down and families beginning to exchange bathing suits and sunscreen for backpacks and notebooks, many kids' minds are undoubtedly filled with wistful memories of sun, sea, and sand as they cling to their final lazy mornings and try to forget about the jail (I mean classroom) to which they will soon return. Of course there is always the subtle, excited buzz of reuniting with friends and reflecting on summer fun, but I think I can speak for most kids in saying that September, instead of bringing a wave of salty water, brings at least to some degree a wave of, " Ugh, 180 days of tests and assignments and getting up early!" And as students' school careers progress, the question is why—why is it that a student's desire to learn is lost? I, for the most part, enjoy school, though I have to say, entering high school has been a rough transition for me. At my middle school, I was surrounded by a family—yes, a family—of teachers who truly cared and were progressively trying to improve education and their students' experiences.

There I met so many wonderful people to whom I really connected and who inspired me to follow in their footsteps. I respect them very much, and while of course there were a couple classes here and there that weren't my favorite, I can easily say that my three years there have been the best in my life so far. But when I arrived at High School last fall, a lot of things changed. Yes my high school is basically a great school and yes there are many great people there as well. But I felt a jolt at the change in mentality.

As one of my teachers put it, " This school makes you think that if you don't get straight A's, you will die alone in a puddle of your own vomit!" While this is a bit exaggerated and I know that standardized tests are not the ONLY component of American education, this teacher's point is well taken. I can't

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walk into that building without feeling like there are some people there who don't really care and who don't really understand kids. Of course there are plenty of people there who are not like that at all, and who do care and put themselves out there for their students, but I felt such a connection to this teacher's words. Some people tell me, " Well, that's part of growing up! People expect different things of you, and we all have to do things we don't like!" But I don't think that kids should have to think about school and go " Ughhhhhhhhh!" So why is it like this? Why does it have to be like this? While almost everything in education doesn't have an easy answer or an answer at all, the answer to this question is: it doesn't have to be this way. Think about it—in elementary school, kids are excited about learning. Of course there's always an exception, but generally they're constantly smiling and energetic, and they're always asking " why?" because they're genuinely interested in what's going on around them.

I volunteer at a day care center, and as soon as I walk in I get hugs and " Hi's!" and am taken by the hand over to see what they're up to. They are into EVERYTHING! But as they grow older, the atmosphere changes—and their mindset with it. Students generally lose their interest in what they're learning, and become interested in only the resulting grade. I continue to be surprised at just how early this starts. For example, take this post ([http://middle-school-teacher.](http://middle-school-teacher.blogspot.com/2012/06/tragedy-of-testing-second-graders.html)

[blogspot.com/2012/06/tragedy-of-testing-second-graders.html](http://middle-school-teacher.blogspot.com/2012/06/tragedy-of-testing-second-graders.html)) on Ms. Teacher's blog—why should a second grader have to sit through hours of testing?! Second graders should be playing and doing the things that second graders naturally do. That's how they learn.

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By exploring and asking questions and interacting (and fighting ????) with kids their age. In a standardized testing situation, all they're learning is that this boring stuff is what defines school and they'll be facing it until they graduate, and if they don't do well, people will be upset. What I don't understand is why grades matter so much. I understand that grading is the result of our need to control (believe me—I used to play school in my basement and “ control” was my middle name) and categorize students (segregation, anyone?), but seriously—what does one letter say about somebody? This is what school has turned into; not, “ What am I learning and do I understand it?” but, “ What letter is on my report card?” and, “ If it's not the desired letter, how fast can I spit back information so that I can ‘ earn’ that desired letter?” When kids are taught that the grade is what matters, that's what classes become centered around. Grades begin to make learning somewhat of a chore, because students always have the burden of “ getting a good grade” hovering over them. What is the purpose of education to begin with? Do we even have a purpose anymore, or has that been lost a long with kids' interest in school? Is the purpose to pile students with pointless assignments, or is it to help them grow academically and as a person? People forget what education is really about, and I think that as the demand for a better education continues to increase, so does the undue pressure on kids, causing them to lose their desire to keep learning.

It's almost like when you put a slinky at the top of the stairs and watch it roll over and over itself until it gets to the bottom. Those at the top of American education are all “ coiled up” in politics, and the more “ stairs” there are (push from outside forces for change, etc.), the more that “ slinky” rolls over

and over itself (creates more policies and standardized testing), and when it gets to the bottom, it's JUST as coiled up and tangled—if not more so—than it was to begin with. The point of my two pages of razzing is not that my high school or other high schools are horrible, or anything like that. My point in writing this is (a) to vent and (b) (more importantly) to ask you to think about your role—whether it be as a student, parent, teacher, administrator, or other—in education. Students: what can you do to make your educational experience worthwhile? Maybe you have teachers who imply that you're school experience isn't worthwhile if you get an F on an assignment.

Make it worthwhile. Parents: do you begin to think that your child will not succeed or that there's something wrong with them if they have a period of I'm-not-doing-so-well? Remember that we're kids and it's hard growing up—you did it once, too—remember? Teachers: do you make your students feel like the point of your class is only that they get an A? Take a minute and remember why you're a teacher in the first place: what's interesting, unique, or meaningful about what you teach? How can you give students that experience? Administrators: do you have a positive vision for your staff and students and actively help them to improve? Don't forget that while your school may receive a rating based on test scores, kids need to leave your hallways and classrooms with values that will get them on the right path (and when I say values, I don't mean, "you are worth a B+!") So when you walk into your school on the first day back, whatever your role may be, remember why you're there to begin with.