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STUDENT BELIEFS/ CHARACTER EDUCATION

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Failure Outside the Classroom

Laurence Steinberg

This selection first appeared in *The Wall Street Journal* on 11 July 1996. Laurence Steinberg is professor of psychology at Temple University and co-author of *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do* (Simon & Schuster, 1996).

President Clinton's proposal last month to widen access to postsecondary education by granting tax credits to help finance the first two years of college may be good politics in this election year. But if we don't do something to improve the quality of the students who will be entering our nation's colleges and universities, the plan will be disastrous policy. The last thing this country needs is a rising tide of mediocre students riding the educational people-mover for 14 rather than 12 years.

What we need instead is an open and candid discussion of why our high school graduates are entering college so ill-prepared for higher education.

By any credible measure, the past two decades of tinkering with America's schools have been an unmitigated failure. Although there are occasional success stories about a school here or a district there that has turned students' performance around, the competence of American students overall has not improved in 25 years. The proportions of high school juniors scoring in the top categories on the math, science, reading, and writing portions of national achievement tests have not changed in any meaningful way in two decades. SAT scores have not

risen since the early 1980s, and they even dropped somewhat in recent years; today they remain lower than they were in the early 1970s. A recent study of the California State University system indicated that half of all freshmen needed remedial education in math, and nearly half needed remedial education in English.

My colleagues and I recently released the results of the most extensive study ever conducted on the forces that affect youngsters' interest and performance in school. Over two years of planning and pilot-testing, four years of data collection in the field, and four years of data analysis, we studied more than 20,000 teenagers and their families in nine very different American communities. Our findings suggest that the sorry state of student achievement in America is due more to the conditions of students' lives outside of school than to what takes place within school walls. The failure of our educational policies is due to our obsession with reforming schools and classrooms, and our general disregard of the contributing forces that, while outside the boundaries of the school, are probably more influential.

According to our research, nearly one in three parents in America is seriously disengaged from his or her adolescent's life, and, especially, from the adolescent's education. Only about one-fifth of parents consistently attend school programs. Nearly one-third of students say their parents have no idea how they are doing in school. About one-sixth of all students report that their parents don't care whether they earn good grades in school.

Nor is there support for achievement within adolescent peer groups. To be sure, teen society in America has never been a strong admirer of academic accomplishment. But widespread parental disengagement has left a large proportion of adolescents far more susceptible to the influence of their friends than in past generations, and this influence is taking its toll on school achievement. Fewer than one in five students say their friends think it is important to get good grades in school. Less than one-fourth of all students regularly discuss their schoolwork with their friends. Nearly one-fifth of all students say they do not try as hard as they can in school because they are worried about what their friends might think.

It's not surprising, then, that very little of the typical American student's time—something on the order of 15 to 20 hours weekly, or only about 15% of his or her waking hours—is spent on endeavors likely to contribute to learning or achievement. In terms of how much time is expected of them for school and school-related pursuits, American stu-

dents are among the least challenged in the industrialized world. Many spend more time flipping hamburgers and roaming malls than they do in school. For too many students, part-time work and after-school socializing have supplanted school-sponsored extracurricular activities—activities that help to strengthen youngsters' attachment to the school as an institution.

President Clinton has called for boosting American student achievement by 2000. But before we rush once again to reinvent the curriculum, retrain our teachers, refurbish our schools' laboratories or expand access to higher education, here are several steps that must be taken:

- Change the focus of the national debate over our achievement problem from reforming schools to changing students' and parents' attitudes and behaviors. No amount of school reform will work unless we recognize the solution as considerably more far-reaching and complicated than simply changing curricular standards, teaching methods, or instructional materials.
- Conduct a serious discussion about the high rate of parental irresponsibility. The widespread disengagement of parents from the business of child-rearing is a public health problem that warrants urgent national attention.
- Recognize that the prevailing and pervasive peer norm of "getting by" is in part a direct consequence of an educational system that neither rewards excellence nor punishes failure. The vast majority of students know all too well that the grades they earn in school will, under the present system, have little or no impact on their future educational or occupational success.

Although schools have played a role in creating this situation, they have been abetted by parents, employers, and institutions of higher education. In our study, more than half of all students said they could bring home grades of "C" or worse without their parents getting upset, and one-quarter said they could bring home grades of "D" or worse without consequence. Few employers ask to see students' high school or college transcripts. With the exception of our country's most selective colleges and universities, our postsecondary educational institutions are willing to accept virtually any applicant with a high school diploma, regardless of

his or her scholastic record. The current practice of providing remedial education in such basic academic skills as reading, writing, and mathematics to entering college students has trivialized the significance of the high school diploma, and drained precious resources away from bona fide college-level instruction.

- Reconsider the proposition that after-school employment is inherently beneficial for teenagers. There is very little evidence that widely available after-school jobs teach students the skills and competencies they will need to be successful, highly educated workers. There is considerable proof, however, that extensive after-school employment has more costs—diminished commitment to school, for instance, and increased drug and alcohol use—than benefits.
- Support school-sponsored extracurricular programs and extend them to as many students as possible. Participation in school-based extracurricular activities strengthens youngsters' commitment to school and carries benefits that spill over into the classroom, especially for students who are having difficulty in school.
- Reestablish in the minds of young people and parents that the primary activity of childhood and adolescence is schooling. If we want our children to value education and strive for achievement, adults must behave as if doing well in school—not just graduating, but actually doing well—is more important than socializing, organized sports, after-school jobs, or any other activity.

For far too long, our national debate about education has been dominated by disputes over how schools ought to be changed without examining the other forces that affect students' willingness to learn and their ability to achieve. It is time to leave behind the myopic view that schools determine student achievement, and, most importantly, that school reform is the solution to America's achievement problem.

No curriculum overhaul, no instructional innovation, no change in school organization, no toughening of standards, no rethinking of teacher training or compensation will succeed if students do not come to school interested in, and committed to, learning. Any policy that merely increases the years of schooling, without ensuring that students and their families are committed to the education process, will be far more costly than any tax credit imaginable.