

PARENTING HIGH ACHIEVERS

Swimming Upstream Against the Cultural Current

by *Stephen Schroeder-Davis*



Imagine that you have been called out of town for the weekend. Because of the urgent nature of the call, you can't ask family or neighbors to watch your children, so you hire a sitter from a very popular agency. Upon your return, your children report that the sitter told them, "Books are overrated" and "Life is short, watch TV." When your children told the sitter of your concerns about too much television, the sitter said, "Don't worry, you've got billions of brain cells," and then scolded them for preferring to go to the park with the admonition, "It's a beautiful day. What are you doing outside?"

Welcome to the world of popular culture. The four "baby-sitter" quotes are taken from ABC's "TV Is Good" campaign, which aired in the fall of 1997.

Certainly you would never knowingly hire someone who espoused the values implicit in the quotes above, yet we invite the television and other forms of media into our homes every day. For the majority of American children, TV watching is the single most time-consuming activity of their waking hours. More time is spent weekly in front of the television than in school.

The underlying values of popular culture, as represented primarily by TV and other forms of mass media, run contrary to the values of many parents. The reality that schools sometimes reinforce rather than contradict these deleterious messages and that peer culture absorbs, reflects, and amplifies these messages can make life very difficult for student scholars who value the life of the mind and are serious about their studies and passionate about learning.

MEDIA MESSAGES: DUMB AND DUMBER!

The messages from responsible adults and popular culture are often in direct conflict. For example:

<i>Parents & Educators Value:</i>	<i>Popular Culture & the Media Teach:</i>
Hard work and Persistence	Intellectual Apathy
Activity and Involvement	Passivity and Solitude
Delaying Gratification	Instant Gratification
Reading and Language	Imagery and Viewing
Respect for Authority	Disrespect
Longer Attention Span	Short Attention Span

There are over two dozen television programs that are either set in schools or feature school-aged children. In nearly every one of these shows, educators are stereotyped as dull and ineffectual, and parents are portrayed as largely clueless regarding their children's activities and on the periphery of their lives. Even the adolescent protagonists fare poorly. Of primary concern to me, however, is television's attitude toward bright, hard-working students. On sitcoms and teen dramas, the "nerd" stereotype is continuously trotted out for laughs. Student scholars are frequently the object of peer rejection and humiliation, a depiction that both *creates and reinforces* negative images for young viewers.

With rare exceptions, media coverage either ignores student scholars or ridicules them. In terms of news coverage, high-achieving students and their academic accomplishments are given so little screen time that one reporter likened their absence to "symbolic annihilation," i.e., you can watch hours of news and never see a substantive story about scholarship.

These injurious screen role models are reinforced in just about every female-oriented teen magazine, which features endless tips about how to shop, attract boys, and lose weight while offering very little about becoming a happy, competent, well-adjusted adolescent.

Most of our children are developmentally both egocentric and naive enough to believe our culture and its values originated with them. However, the truth is more complicated. The fact is that most of our children's values are derivative: They are adopted and adapted from parents, churches, schools, and popular culture. Children are not born thinking that bright students are "study-buddies," "brainiacs," or worse. They develop such prejudices the same way they learn racism or sexism, from imitating the attitudes and behaviors of adults. When they see a bumper sticker that reads, "Your child may be an honor student, but you are an idiot," they learn an indelible lesson about anti-intellectualism.

GENERIC PEER CULTURE

What are the attitudes of school-aged children toward academic effort and achievement? It will come as no surprise that a huge body of research reveals that the answer is "ambivalent" and that attitudes toward high achievers become more negative as students approach junior high age.

Given the tremendous power of popular culture and its trivialization of and negative attitude toward academic effort and achievement, it should come as no surprise that researchers have found that:

- 50% of high school students do not do assigned homework;
- less than 20% have friends who value good grades;
- less than 25% discuss homework with friends;
- "jocks" and "partiers" are, respectively, five and three times more popular than "brains;"
- the hard working, intelligent student is the least popular "type" in American schools, and those designated "brains" are the most shunned and avoided of all adolescent groups.

Within generic peer culture, there is tremendous pressure to conform to group standards by calibrating academic efforts downward toward mediocrity and away from true excellence. "Getting by," "staying eligible," and "appeasing parents" are goals that are understood and accepted by most students, while a sincere pursuit of academic excellence, a love of books and ideas, and a passion for the life of the mind can make the scholar a social pariah. Such behaviors and attitudes create painful "forced-choice dilemmas" for student scholars. Given the importance of social stature and the fragile egos of young adolescents, it is predictable that many will intentionally underachieve or hide their abilities to gain acceptance and avoid teasing.

ATHLETICS VS. ACADEMICS

An interesting sidelight to these dilemmas is that athletic effort is consistently recognized and rewarded. Popular culture, schools, and the adolescent peer group all confer tremendous status upon athletes. In fact, athletes are the most revered group in schools — honored by students, teachers, the media, and their communities. This phenomena dates back to the late 1940s and is still true today.

Recent surveys of high school students revealed that 66 percent felt that student athletes received more recognition than student scholars. The relentless marketing of professional athletes is only a partial explanation for this.

Many high schools, in fact, nearly all that I have visited, inadvertently not only fail to *combat* the undue glorification of athletics, but actually *add* the weight of school culture to that of popular culture when they recognize and celebrate athletic accomplishments more frequently and more publicly than academic and creative achievements. Communities can amplify this problem with banners, calendars, honors banquets, and local newspaper articles that celebrate sports triumphs and ignore or trivialize academic accomplishments and participation.

We should not leave our children at the mercy of such messages, which are unfair to both the athlete and the scholar. We must not mislead impressionable young athletes about the ultimate significance of interscholastic sports. At the same time, we must take responsibility for affirming all forms of legitimate achievement. We must do all in our power to ensure that the media, our schools, and our youth come to believe that hard work and academics are worthwhile and exciting pursuits — well worth recognizing and celebrating.

SELF-CENTEREDNESS VS. SERVICE

This final dilemma is in some ways the most disheartening because it reflects the extremes adults must go to "sell" academic achievement to our youth. In a study I conducted (Schroeder-Davis, 1995) of 3,514 Minnesota secondary

students — in which they were asked, “Would you rather be the best looking, most athletic, or most intelligent student in your class?” — 1,892 or 53.8 percent chose “most intelligent.” This good news is muted considerably by the respondents’ fear of losing popularity and prestige and by another, more insidious problem.

When asked to explain the reasons for choosing “most intelligent,” only 52 respondents [2.8 percent] alluded to some form of community or social benefit such as curing a disease or solving a civic or societal problem. The remaining 93 percent of the respondents echoed one another by repeating this litany: “If I get good grades, I’ll go to a good college. If I go to a good college, I’ll get a good job. If I get a good job, I’ll make lots of money.”

It is my contention that many adults, in a desperate effort to motivate students to invest time and effort in their studies, have emphasized the potential long-term monetary gains associated with a good education almost to the exclusion of the myriad other benefits that true education brings to individuals and communities. These include enriching an individual for life and cultivating individual as well as social skills that would be of use and service in enriching the lives of others. Since intelligence and scholarship bring such immediate, negative *social* costs, we have tried to persuade students of long-term, *monetary* gains.

Even though there are demonstrable economic benefits to a good education, do we really want to “sell” learning as being a mere fiscal advantage?

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO: ESTABLISHING A CLIMATE FOR SCHOLARSHIP AT HOME AND IN SCHOOL

Parents have a tremendous opportunity to nurture and protect achievement values and scholarly pursuits by actively and vociferously contradicting the “dumbing down” messages sent by the larger culture, the media, and peer culture.

I take these recommendations directly from parents and high-achieving students I have interviewed and surveyed during the last five years as part of my work for the Minnesota Academic Excellence Foundation.

At Home

1) *Expect your children to do their best.* “Doing the best” does not mean that a student needs to be the best over everyone else, but rather his or her best. There was near universal sentiment among parents



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and students that this was a fair, challenging standard that promoted effort, achievement, and high self-esteem. Whether in athletics or academics, help children measure progress and achievement against their own base lines. Students may be satisfied improving a grade in science from a C to a B or playing junior varsity tennis instead of varsity.

2) *Model the virtues and habits of mind you value.* Persistence, hard work, reliability, and reading were the values parents most frequently mentioned by those I surveyed.

3) *Attend conferences, concerts, games, and competitions.* Simply put, make time for those things you value.

4) *Monitor work, extracurricular activities, and curfews to ensure ample time for studying and sleep.* Many secondary students report being too tired to study

effectively. While being well rounded is important, school and school work need to be a priority during our children’s formative years.

5) *Inoculate your child against the negative messages peers and popular culture will send.* Just as we immunize our children against various childhood illnesses, we should do the same for the inevitable assaults on their minds:

- Help them develop a love of learning and a thirst for knowledge from their earliest years;
- Teach them to think independently and to resist the lure of the crowd;
- Provide opportunities to meet other children who share their passions and abilities — one or two true friends who share interests can offset the teasing and indifference of an entire class;
- Talk about the messages you hear from the media; become “media literate” and help your children do the same;
- If you encounter bumper stickers proclaiming “My kid can beat up your honor student” talk about what it means. Most anti-intellectual messages will be less obvious and therefore more dangerous; address them all whenever you are aware of them.


In School

For parents, school climate represents the toughest challenge for several reasons. First of all, you do not attend the school and cannot monitor school activities on a daily basis. Second, if you are to become an activist, you want to be known as an advocate and concerned parent rather than a nuisance. Third, and most problematic, school officials all give lip service to — and most sincerely believe — that their primary mission is academics, even if gifted programs are not often a priority. It may be hard to persuade them that many of the rituals and routines practiced in schools undercut academics and discourage scholarship.

Parents can measure and improve their school’s climate for scholarship by examining budgetary priorities and observable “hallmarks”:

- Is there academic lettering analogous to lettering in athletics? Is there an academic activities coordinator, and is that position commensurate with the athletic director in pay, stature, and release time?


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- Does the school hold banquets, pep-fests, and other forms of recognition for academics on a parallel with athletics?
- Do school publications, those generated by students and by adults, prominently display creative, artistic, and academic achievements?
- Are valedictorians, national merit scholars, and academic scholarship recipients honored? 
- Is the chess or speech champion as well known as the football star?
- Are academic/creative/scholarly trophies and awards displayed as prominently as athletic awards?

The cultural current is strong. It is filled with riptides that would pull your child out into the ocean of mediocrity and malaise. The surest life jackets against such peril are awareness of



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the forces that could pull your child under and articulation of values and opportunities at home and in school that buoy your child for safe passage through adolescence and young adulthood. The rest is up to them. 

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Talented and current board member of the Minnesota Educators of the Gifted. His dissertation, Beauty, Brains, or Brawn? was an examination of adolescent attitudes toward giftedness and led directly to his post-doctoral work regarding the media's influence on adolescent attitudes toward intelligence and scholarship. He is the happily married father of three gifted children.