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The Future of School? "Most Likely to Succeed" Offers Ideas

By David B. Cohen on May 3, 2015 2:20 AM

Last Tuesday, (4/28/15), I was part of the audience in a packed auditorium at Palo Alto's Gunn High School, watching the new film "Most Likely to Succeed" and listening to a panel discussion afterwards. The film offers a fairly deep look at the student, teacher, and parent experience at San Diego's High Tech High (HTH). The central argument of the film is that a problem/project-based learning approach, featuring flexibility and autonomy for both teachers and students, will provide students with skills and mindsets that are more valuable and more effective than are typically fostered in the traditional American school.

With "Waiting for Superman" and other documentaries in the collective memory of many educators, we may bring some skepticism to education films with an advocacy agenda. When I saw that "Most Likely to Succeed" focuses on a charter school, that raised questions for me as well - and I'm sure it won't be long before you see charter school organizations and advocates praising this film. However, after watching the film and listening to the discussion, I'm glad to recommend it to anyone interested in the future of American education. If the charter angle is important to you, I address it in more detail in the final two paragraphs.

The film opens with footage and historical information relating to the current norms in public education: subjects separated, time broken up,

teacher and textbook-centered instruction. The limitations of this model are all too recognizable as director Greg Whiteley turns the camera on his daughter, who is still in elementary school and has adults telling her to tough it out and get through the tedium of math because in her job or *in law school….* Beyond the illustration provided by Whiteley's daughter, the arguments for a new paradigm are conveyed throughout the film by leaders in education and business. Adding urgency to the idea of change, Whiteley dedicates a few minutes to IBM's "Deep Blue" - the computer that beat Gary Kasparov in chess - and "Watson" - the computer that mastered the game show "Jeopardy!" The point is clear: technology, the economy, and our understanding of children and learning have all evolved far more than our schools, and it's time for that to change.

The alternative presented through most of the film is the project-based learning at High Tech High in San Diego, a school founded by Larry Rosenstock. Decades ago he taught students carpentry, and found that if they were motivated to build something, they would learn geometry, and retain the learning in the long run. The idea is that students learn best by doing, and what they do should be complex, challenging, self-directed (with support), and purposeful.

An incoming class of ninth graders at HTH serves as the primary focus of the film. On the first day of school, they're understandably shy, and seem lost as they try to figure out how to rearrange tables in their classroom to match a diagram on the white board. As the year goes on, we see them taking responsibility for their own learning and for each other, through projects that combine art, engineering, literature, social studies and history. One aspect of the film I appreciated was that the kids in "Most Likely to Succeed" don't always succeed. Failure *is* an option, especially in one case - no spoilers here - but it's the response to that failure that matters.

Failure might even be good for students. That point was reinforced in the panel discussion after the film screening; Laszlo Bock, who's in charge of "People Operations" at Google, cited a study of Harvard Business School graduates who seemed to plateau about a decade into their post-graduate careers. The common element turned out to be that they were *too* successful early on. Bock suggested that experience with failure during a more formative phase seems valuable in building the mindset for sustaining growth later. (Bock's *Work Rules* looks like it might be worth a look as well). The mindset reference was a reference to the work of Carol Dweck, whose research showed that **learning and growth occur when success and failure are understood as the results of effort**, rather than the externalization of fixed personal traits.

Another strength of the film is that it allows its subjects to delve into the challenges and trade-offs in this approach to education. Parents and teachers do acknowledge that this kind of teaching and learning may not suit everyone. There is a chance that students won't have the breadth of knowledge that some of their peers have in certain subject areas. They may not "cover" all of the standards (in fact, one teacher in the film is entirely dismissive of state standards). However, the most effective response to that concern is that breadth of knowledge, acquired via textbook and lecture in the traditional classroom, often fades quickly when the coursework ends, its value proving to be ephemeral at best.

I would recommend doing so if you have a chance to see "Most Likely to Succeed." The essential idea is not that all schools should imitate High Tech High, but rather that teachers, education leaders, and policy makers must be bold enough to create multiple new visions of what schools are and what they do. We live in a different world than the one that spawned our current educational model. A century's worth of learning about learning and children should be more consistently reflected in the ways we teach our students in the present, and prepare them for a future of rapid, almost unimaginable change.

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Yes, the film mentions that HTH is a charter school, and that teachers have year-to-year contracts rather than the permanent status and due process protections found in unionized district schools. The film says that teachers at HTH are willing to trade those protections for the autonomy that they enjoy in this teaching environment. It's beyond the scope of the film, but I would note that teachers unions, teacher autonomy, and charter schools can all co-exist in various ways. Still, if "Most Likely to Succeed" implies that unions and "tenure" are potential obstacles to innovation, or that HTH staff believe that to be the case, it's brief and subtle. The filmmakers spent time filming in many different types of schools, and seem to have settled on the idea of focusing on one school for the benefit of depth over breadth. The film doesn't have the kind of political funding and public relations apparatus that would raise the concerns that accompanied **"Waiting for Superman"** or "**Teach**."

On other matters relating to charters, the film notes that charters receive slightly less public funding than non-charters, without discussing where they might save money compared to a comprehensive public high school (transportation, athletics, special education, lower pay and benefits?), and without discussing fundraising or grants; for example, the HTH Foundation collects hundreds of thousands of dollars for the school each year, and the school was launched with significant support from the Gates Foundation. The school admission lottery is structured to draw evenly from surrounding zip codes, and the film says that half of HTH students come from low-income families; it's not clear what steps a family might need to undertake to enter the lottery, nor is there information about special education or other high-needs enrollment at the school. I do not mean to criticize the film or High Tech High on these matters, but rather to preempt claims that charter schools as a sector take on challenges identical to the traditional comprehensive schools and **"do more with less"** (For more on charters: **"Are School Choice and Equity Incompatible?"**).

Photo: Director Greg Whiteley introduces his film to a Palo Alto audience, 4/27/15 ; by David B. Cohen.

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