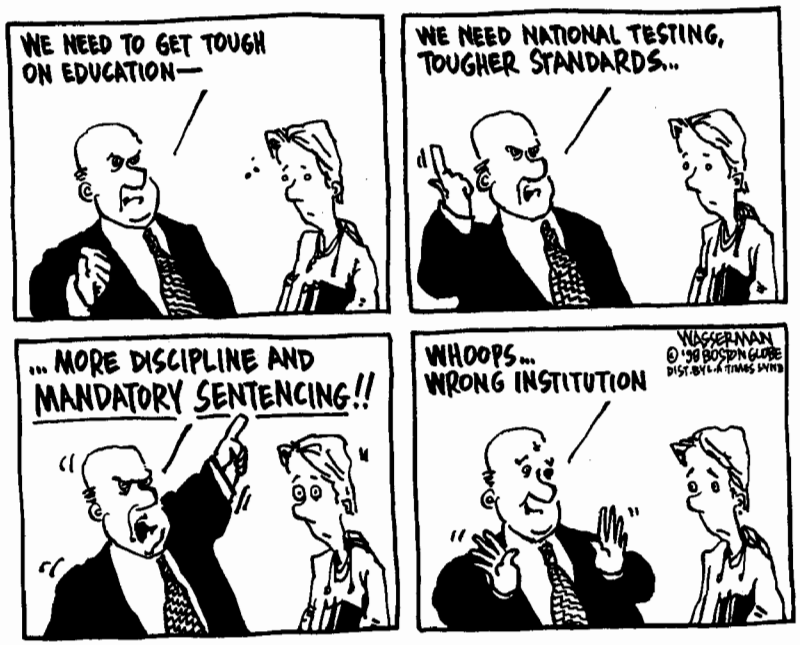

2

GETTING MOTIVATION WRONG
The Costs of Overemphasizing Achievement

IF WE WANT to talk about schools in a way that matters, we have to talk about the people in schools. In fact, we have to make a habit of seeing things from the perspective of that student sitting right over there. You see her? She's playing with her hair and wondering why the clock stops moving during math class. Meaningful educational reform requires us to understand her point of view: Can she connect at any level with what she just read? Does she have any reason for wanting to connect with it? What's her goal when she opens a book? If she puts any effort into her writing, is it because she gets a kick out of finding the right words, because she wants to please her mom, or because she's afraid of looking lame?

I don't want to mention any names, but some social scientists specializing in education may as well be crunching numbers about *E. coli* or the electromagnetic spectrum. Even those who conduct research on motivation sometimes forget to ask students "what sorts of subject matter and what associated teaching methods make sense to them."[1] Likewise, some teachers are "more interested in what they're teaching than in what students are learning,"[2] more focused on the subject matter than on the kids.

These distinctions are not idle or incidental. They are not platitudes about the Importance of Children lifted from a soothing after-dinner speech. For anyone who cares about education, these are the issues that matter the most. They have the power to turn our beliefs and practices inside out, as we're about to see. Does it matter whether your child studied last night? Yes; but what may matter even more is *why* he did so (or didn't). Does it make any difference whether your child did well on a test? Sure; but what will be even more important over the long haul is

why she thinks she did well—that is, how she accounts for her success. It is the student's point of view—specifically, a psychologically informed understanding of that point of view—that determines whether real learning will happen and keep happening. As any number of studies have found, a child's "thoughts and emotions while performing an action are more important in determining subsequent engagement than the actual outcome of that action."[3]

The failure to understand this is the first distinguishing feature of those who march behind the banner of Tougher Standards. I refer especially to the people who sit on Mount Olympus, where no children live, and insist that students be made to learn. They like to talk about motivating kids, as though motivation could be imposed from the outside. They are fixated on observable, testable behaviors (such as correctly pronouncing the words on a page) while ignoring the people who are doing the behaving (and whether they care about, or understand, those words). They may even set up a dichotomy whereby we are supposed to choose between being committed to Excellence, on the one hand, and just being worried about how students "feel" about what they're doing, on the other.

The fact is, unless we attend to how students feel about what they're doing, it's less likely that they will become excellent learners. All those demands to raise standards aren't just disrespectful of kids; ultimately, they're unlikely to succeed even on their own terms. This chapter explains why.

What Versus How Well

When he was the mayor of New York City, beginning in the late 1970s, Ed Koch was famous for wandering through the streets and asking passersby, "How'm I doin'?" This affectation he evidently regarded as endearing—as opposed to, say, neurotic. Getting students to ask this same question umpteen times a day seems to be a major purpose of our educational system. Indeed, the dominant version of contemporary educational reform consists of leaning on students, teachers, administrators, and parents until they focus ever more intently on results.

What could possibly be wrong with results? To answer this question, we first have to recognize that for people to think about *how well* they're doing is not at all the same as thinking about *what* they're doing.[4] These represent two very different mind-sets for parents, students, and educators. Imagine two parents, for example, both of whose children mention that they wrote an essay in school that day. One parent wants to know how good the essay was and asks what the teacher said about it. The other parent asks about the essay itself and the process of writing it: Why did you choose that topic? Did your opinion about the subject change while you were writing? How did you decide what to include in the opening paragraph?

Or imagine a student who comes home from school announcing that "she had a great day because she got an A, did better than her best friend, or . . . won the spelling bee." These accomplishments reflect a very different set of goals than those held by a student who says "she had a great day because she finally mastered long division, read a wonderful story about India, or tried to solve a really difficult problem."[5] One of these children regards learning as a means (to a grade or a victory or just to being able to say she was successful). The other regards learning as an end.

Teachers and administrators, too, may promote one mind-set more than the other. Consider a school that constantly emphasizes the importance of performance! results! achievement! success! A child who has absorbed that message may find it difficult to get swept away with the process of creating a poem, trying to build a working telescope, or figuring out why fighting always seems to be breaking out in the Balkans. He may be so concerned about the results that he's not all that concerned about the activity that produces those results.

As students move from elementary to middle or junior high school, there is an especially marked, and often irreversible, shift from trying to figure things out to trying to be high achievers[6]—although it isn't unusual to find even young children being led to think less about making sense of what they're doing and more about how successful they've been at doing it. The two goals aren't mutually exclusive, of course, but in practice they feel different and lead to different kinds of behaviors.[7] Without even knowing how well a student actually did at a task or how smart she is supposed to be, we can tell a lot just from knowing whether she is more concerned about layers of learning or levels of achievement.

Like most people, I think it matters how effectively students are learning. It's appropriate to sit down with them every so often to figure out how successful they (and their teachers) have been. But when we get carried away with results, we wind up, paradoxically, with results that are less than ideal. Surprising as it may seem, the evidence suggests that our long-term goals for children and schools are less likely to be realized when teachers, parents, and the students themselves become preoccupied with standards and achievement.

The Costs of Overemphasizing Achievement

Let's be clear about exactly what is wrong with encouraging students to put "how well they're doing" ahead of "what they're doing." An impressive and growing body of research suggests that this emphasis (1) undermines students' interest in learning, (2) makes failure seem overwhelming, (3) leads students to avoid challenging themselves, (4) reduces the quality of learning, and (5) invites students to think about how smart they are instead of how hard they tried. Any one of these five consequences should be cause for concern; together, they make it abundantly clear that the conventional wisdom about schooling has to be rethought.

Interest. When students are constantly encouraged to think about how well they're performing, the first likely casualty is their attitude toward learning. They may come to view the tasks themselves—the stories and science projects and math problems—as stuff they're supposed to do better at, not stuff they're excited about exploring. Or, as Carol Dweck, one of the leading researchers in this field, once put it, "Performance goals may well create the very conditions that have been found to undermine intrinsic interest."[8]

We can immediately see that the kind of student who is "learning-oriented"—the student whose goal is to understand and who is thinking about *what* she is doing—is likely to enjoy school. But the flip side is that her classmate, who is mostly concerned with being a top performer, is probably a lot less eager. Research and experience teach us that when "performance-oriented instructional strategies" are used, such as emphasizing the importance of good grades and high test scores, students tend to value reading less.[9]

That doesn't mean they won't read. Indeed, some performance-driven or competitive students may persevere at a task when they've been told they have to do well. But a genuine interest in the task—or excitement about the whole idea of learning—often begins to evaporate as soon as achievement becomes the main point. Assuming it's important to us that our children become lifelong learners, we have good reason to be concerned if too much attention to boosting achievement during school can make the whole idea of learning seem like a chore.

Reaction to Failure. No one succeeds all the time, and no one can learn very effectively without making mistakes and bumping up against limits. It's extremely important, therefore, to encourage a healthy and resilient attitude toward failure. As a rule, that is exactly what students tend to have if their main goal is to learn: when they do something incorrectly, they figure out what went wrong and how to fix it. Their mood is generally positive and their attitude is optimistic.

Not so for the kids who are mostly concerned about how well they're doing, who believe (often because they have been told explicitly) that the point is to succeed—or even to do better than everyone else. They seem to be fine as long as they're succeeding, but as soon as they hit a bump they may regard themselves as failures and act as though they're helpless to do anything about it. They are "always vulnerable to becoming overwhelmed by a failure experience," so that a momentary stumble can seem to cancel out all their past successes.[10] *When the point isn't to figure things out but to prove how good you are, it's often hard to cope with being told you're not so good.*

Consider the student who falls apart when he gets a 92 instead of his usual 100. We've all seen such kids. We may even have such a kid or have been such a kid. The problem is that no matter how familiar we are with such a reaction, we invariably analyze what's going on incorrectly. Consistent with our whole society's tendency to ignore the bigger picture, we usually see it as a problem with the individual and conclude that such students are just too hard on themselves. But the distinction between "what I'm doing" and "how well I'm doing" can let us see what is going on here through a new lens. Instead of blaming the student's anxiety or depression on his psychological makeup, we begin to realize that a systemic demand for high achievement may have led him to become debilitated when he fails—even if the failure is only relative. The important point isn't what level of performance qualifies as failure (a 92 vs. a 40, say); it's the perceived pressure not to fail. That can have a particularly harmful impact on high-achieving and high-ability students.[11]

Thus, reassuring such a student that "a 92 is still very good" or that we're sure he'll "do better next time" doesn't just miss the point—it makes things worse by underscoring yet again that success is all that counts. We may intend to be supportive and helpful, but in fact we've managed to drive home the message that the point of school isn't to explore ideas, it's to do well. Similarly, it really doesn't help to give students easier tasks so they can "experience success" and feel more confident, or to provide them with lots of positive feedback.[12] None of this gets at what is really going on, which is emphasizing the level of achievement to the exclusion of learning.

Avoidance of Challenge. If the point is to succeed rather than to stretch one's thinking or discover new ideas, it is completely logical for a student to want to do whatever is easiest. That, after all, will maximize the probability of success—or at least minimize the probability of failure.

Again we have a new explanation for a familiar phenomenon: we've all seen children cut corners and do as little as they can get away with. But perhaps we shouldn't assume it's just because they're lazy—another explanation based on the characteristics of individuals, which happens to be extremely convenient for adults because it implies that only the child has to be fixed. Perhaps "performance goals work against the pursuit of challenge."[13]

A number of researchers have tested this hypothesis. Typically, a bunch of kids are told they're going to be given a task, such as recognizing patterns or rearranging letters. Some are informed that this is a test, that it will count for a grade, or that they're going to be told how well they've done or videotaped so their performance can be evaluated. The others, meanwhile, are encouraged to think of this as an opportunity to learn rather than to do well. Then each student is allowed to choose how hard a version of the task he or she wants to try. The result is always the same: those who have been told it's "an opportunity to learn" are more willing to challenge themselves than those who had been led to think about how well they'd do.[14]

It doesn't seem to matter how old the children are. It doesn't even matter how secure they may be about their abilities. Those led to think about the level of their achievement probably won't reach beyond their comfort zone to see what they're capable of doing or learning. When you place enough stress on results, research shows that even the most confident students will actively steer toward easier tasks.[15] In fact, some of them will be so determined to perform well that they'll take the next logical step to cut corners: a 1998 study confirmed that the more schools emphasize grades, honor rolls, and other indicators of performance, the more likely students are to cheat, even if they know it's wrong.[16]

Sometimes the pressure comes from school, and sometimes it comes from home. While very few parents would tell their kids to copy answers or even to stick to tasks they can do easily, their priorities come through clearly enough. A study of 501 mothers of elementary school students found that those moms for whom achievement mattered most were more likely to want their children to choose projects "that would involve a minimum of struggle and likely result in success" rather than those "where they'll learn a lot of new things but also make a lot of mistakes."[17]

And the kids get the message. They're not being lazy so much as rational. They're adapting to an environment where results, not intellectual exploration, are what count. They're saying to us, "Hey, *you* told me the point here is to achieve, to get A's, to bring home a bumper sticker about how successful I am! Well, I'm not stupid: the easier the task, the more likely it is that I'll be able to give you what you want. So don't blame me when I try to find the least challenging thing to do and end up not learning anything." Once students start to think this way, it's hard for them to stop: even when they're not being evaluated, they may have gotten into the habit of picking easy things to do so they'll appear smart. The pressure to perform has left its mark.[18] If they've internalized the imperative to get good grades, they'll still be looking for the easiest possible courses when they get to college.[19]

It's not hard to tell whether we've created such a mind-set for any given group of students. All we have to do is watch for signs that they're more interested in getting the right answer than in figuring out why this answer may be better than that one. All we have to do is watch for students zipping through an assignment as though speed mattered most. ("Done!") All we have to do is give them something ridiculously simple to do and watch how they respond. If they seem relieved and happy, something is seriously amiss. If, however, they seem disappointed—"Ah, this is too easy. This is no fun. Where's the challenge?"—then we've done something right, either in the attitudes we've taught them at home[20] or the norms and structures we've set up at school.

In putting the emphasis on "we," I think of how Peter Scholtes, a management consultant, answers executives who want to know what they should do with "all the deadwood" in their companies. Scholtes likes to reply that the real question is what their organizations have done to kill all those live trees. The problem, in other words, isn't with the individuals, their effort or attitude, so much as with the system in which they find themselves. With students, too, the irony is almost palpable when parents and teachers and school reformers complain bitterly about how kids today just want to take the easy way out—while simultaneously emphasizing performance and results so as to lead predictably to that very outcome.

Quality of Learning. The goal of some students is to acquire new skills, to find out about the world, to understand what they're doing. When they pick up a book, they're thinking about what they're reading, not about how well they're reading it. Paradoxically, these students who have put success out of their minds are likely to be successful. They process information more deeply, review things they didn't understand the first time, make connections between what they're doing now and what they learned earlier, and use more strategies to make sense of the ideas they're encountering. All of this has been demonstrated empirically.[21]

What about the students who have been led to focus on results? How well do they do? That depends on what we mean by "how well." Students who think about nothing but producing the right answer, scoring

well on a test, or getting an A may adopt the kinds of study habits that generate more right answers and high test scores and good grades.[22] (I say "may" because some students just become demoralized or demotivated and give up.)

If, however, our top priority is for kids to think widely and deeply and explore ideas thoughtfully—that is, if we're more interested in excellence than in high grades and test scores—then the news isn't good. In this sense, *students who have been led to focus on how well they're doing tend not to do very well.* One facet of excellence is the ability to transfer understanding—that is, to take something you've learned over here and apply it to a new task or question over there. In 1985, as a group of eighth-graders were about to begin a week-long unit in science class, two researchers asked them some questions designed to determine whether they were more interested in understanding or in success. When the unit was over, the students were tested on their ability to transfer their new knowledge. Regardless of whether their earlier test scores had been high or low, the success-oriented students simply did not do as well as those who were more oriented toward learning.[23]

Of course, that's just one study. But a dozen years later another researcher looked for other experiments that had addressed this same basic question to see whether the two goals had different effects on how successful students actually were. He dug up two dozen such studies that used a variety of different tasks to measure achievement, from reading comprehension tests to collages, from anagrams to computer simulations. Using a statistical technique known as meta-analysis, he combined them into one giant, powerful experiment and ultimately reached this simple conclusion: "Learning goals will lead to better task outcomes than will performance goals." This result was especially true of older students and with tasks that were relatively complicated. The more that real thinking was required, the worse the results for kids who were concerned about high achievement.[24]

Again, it may be possible to get good grades, at least in the short run, by focusing on performance. It may be that reading, practicing, or memorizing only what's likely to be on the test—and covering that material in a cursory way—can sometimes help students do well on the test itself. But does this prove that it "works" to focus on how well one is doing? Or does it reveal how little grades and tests really tell us and instead point up what's wrong with the disproportionate emphasis on achievement that suffuses our schools?

In the long run, even these less meaningful measures of achievement like grades and tests may be adversely affected by too much attention to

performance. Remember the study showing that success-oriented mothers wanted their children to avoid unnecessary challenges? Two other groups of researchers went a step further, looking at whether a parent's perspective affected how well students actually learned. In the first study, conducted in Vermont, fifth-grade children and their parents were interviewed, and special attention was paid to moms and dads who either punished their kids for bad grades or rewarded them for good grades. Both practices, it turned out, "were associated with lower grades and poorer achievement scores" as well as "less motivation, pleasure, and persistence in doing their work in school." (In fact, rewarding seemed to be even more harmful than punishing.) In the second study, conducted in California, researchers were interested in how much mothers of nine-year-olds valued their kids' "curiosity, mastery, and exposure to new experiences" in school—as opposed to valuing achievement to the point of pushing their kids (by emphasizing the importance of doing well, giving rewards for good grades, or removing privileges for bad grades). Once again it turned out that the children whose parents stressed success were less interested in learning and, as a result, were *less likely to do well in school.*[25] The more that achievement was the parents' chief concern, the lower was the kids' achievement.

So what might explain this intriguing, even disturbing, tendency for too much emphasis on results—at home or at school—to undermine exactly what we'd like to promote? We've already come across some possible answers: this mind-set, remember, can produce students who have no particular interest in learning new ways of thinking, who may fall apart when they make a mistake, and who will probably avoid challenging themselves unnecessarily. If any of these things happens, then the quality of learning would logically be expected to suffer as well.[26] We might add to that list yet another research finding: students who are concerned about doing well, especially in comparison to their classmates, are relatively unlikely to ask for help when they need it.[27] When they do ask for help, moreover, it's likely because they've given up and just want to know the answer—as opposed to asking for clues so they can solve the problem on their own.[28]

There is one more explanation, which can also be considered the fifth consequence of placing more emphasis on "how well" than on "what." It's important enough to deserve a section of its own.

Think You're Smart? Think Again

Imagine that your child comes home from school today with a score of 100 on a quiz. For the time being, let's put aside the question of how sensible it is for teachers to rely on traditional quizzes, requiring students to memorize certain facts so their performance can be reduced to a number or letter. Let's just consider whether you regard this 100 as good news. If you're like most parents, it would never occur to you not to be delighted. No one has ever given you any other way to look at it.

Until now. The fact is that a number of different lines of research "converge on one point: success or failure per se might be less important than a child's perception of the *causes* of the success or failure."[29] Thus, what matters more than the score is why your child thinks she got it.

Consider what some of those reasons may be. One possibility is *effort:* she tried hard, studied, did all she could to learn the material. A second possibility is *ability:* if you asked her how she got 100, she might reply, "Well, I guess I'm just smart." (Even if she doesn't say it out loud, she might think it's true.) Yet another answer is *luck:* she believes she guessed correctly or was just having a good day. Finally, she may explain the result in terms of the level of *difficulty* of the task—in this case, the test was easy.

Notice that these same four reasons could be used by another kid—not yours, of course—to make sense of his grade of 23 on the same quiz: I didn't try hard; I'm just stupid; it was bad luck; the test was hard. This basic framework for understanding success and failure was developed a generation ago by a psychologist named Bernard Weiner, and it has generated a flood of research. If you think about it, the four factors can be classified in several different ways. Two of the four (ability and effort) are features of the student herself; the other two (luck and difficulty) are external. Ability and maybe even task difficulty are relatively stable factors; the other two may vary from one moment to the next. One variable (effort) she can control; the other three she can't.

After I lay all this out for educators during a speech or workshop, I ask them to make a value judgment: Which of these four explanations for doing well (or poorly) do you favor? Which would you like to see your students use to account for their performance? (Take a moment here to make your own choice.) The answer is almost always unanimous, regardless of politics, positions on various educational controversies, or knowledge about psychological research. Traditionalists and progressives, kindergarten teachers and high school principals and professors—nearly everyone votes for effort. It bodes well for the future when kids attribute a score of 100 to how carefully they prepared for the test. Likewise, those

who attribute a 23 to *not* preparing for the test "tend to perceive failure as surmountable and will often show heightened persistence or improved performance in the face of negative evaluation."[30] It makes perfect sense.

So here's the punch line: *When kids are led to focus on how well they are performing in school, they tend to explain their performance not by how hard they tried but by how smart they are.* A student with a performance focus—How am I doing? Am I improving fast enough? Are my grades high enough? Do I know the right answers?—is likely to interpret the answer to all these questions "in terms of how much ability [he or she has] and whether or not this ability is adequate to achieve success," as Dweck and a colleague have explained.[31] In a study of academically advanced students, for example, the more emphasis that teachers put on getting good grades, avoiding mistakes, and keeping up with everyone else, the more the students tended to attribute poor performance to lack of ability or to how hard the tasks were—that is, to factors outside their control.[32] When students are constantly made to think about how well they are doing, they are apt to explain the outcome in terms of who they are rather than how hard they tried.

This is clearly not a productive way for kids to look at things, regardless of whether they have been successful or unsuccessful.[33] Research demonstrates that adolescents who explain how well they're doing on the basis of ability tend to think less deeply and carefully about what they're learning than do those who appeal to the idea of effort.[34] Similarly, elementary school students who attribute failure to ability are likely to be poorer readers.[35] And if children are encouraged to think of themselves as "smart" when they succeed, doing poorly on a subsequent task will bring down their achievement even though it doesn't trip up other kids.[36] Thus, if focusing on how well one is doing is counterproductive, as we saw before, it may be partly because of the way it induces students to think about the reasons for how well they're doing (and what that says about how smart they are).

There are several theories about why explaining results in terms of one's intelligence—and construing intelligence as basically unchangeable[37]—is so destructive.[38] First, if a student believes he screwed up because he's just not smart enough, the implication is that he can't be successful. In a pattern that can begin as early as first grade, he will come to expect failure,[39] which creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: a posture of helplessness makes him throw up his hands and do exactly as poorly as he feared. The problem here is with my brain, he figures, so what's the point of trying? And so he stops.

Second, he may become preoccupied with, and upset by, the idea of his own incompetence—to the point that it distracts him from what he's do-

ing, thus bringing down his achievement even further. Like the student who thinks too much about being successful, the one who attributes the results to ability tends "to be debilitated by failure."[40]

Finally, if he is sufficiently worried about his intelligence, he may deliberately avoid studying so he can point to that fact as the only reason he failed. Ironically, his concern with his own ability may lead him to take defensive measures that allow him to believe his ability isn't so low after all. ("Hey, if I *had* studied. . . .")[41] The student who brags right before a test about how little he did to prepare is not only providing himself with an excuse for failure but an explanation for success: if he aces the test, it's obviously because he's smart. "Those with performance goals . . . viewed effort and ability as inversely related"[42]: only dumb kids need to study. All of this makes it less likely that such a student will apply himself—or, as already noted, ask for help—which is another reason that thinking in terms of ability is so counterproductive.

So what leads students to attribute success or failure to ability rather than to effort? Gender apparently plays a role, with a number of studies suggesting that girls are more likely than boys to believe that results reflect intelligence, particularly in fields like math and science. Culture is also relevant: as more and more commentators are noticing, the Japanese tend to attribute results to effort, whereas Americans think in terms of ability.[43] But beyond gender and culture, the unfortunate tendency for students to think about how well they're doing as a function of how smart or stupid they happen to be is partly due to the exaggerated emphasis placed on how well they're doing in the first place.

The upshot of all this is that beliefs about intelligence, and about the causes of one's own success and failure, matter a lot. They often make more of a difference than how confident students are, how successful they are, or what they're truly capable of doing. If, like the cheerleaders for Tougher Standards, we look only at the test scores and grades, we end up overlooking how students make sense of those results. And if we get kids thinking too much about how to do better, they may end up making sense of those results in the least constructive way.

Making a Bad Thing Worse

Having explored how an emphasis on achievement can backfire, we're now ready to consider the possibility that some versions of this mind-set are worse than others. If we were determined, for some perverse reason, to maximize the harm of this whole focus on achievement, we could simply do any of the following three things: (1) increase the pressure on students, (2) set them against one another in some kind of contest, or (3) dare them not to fail.

The first of these is fairly straightforward. People of all ages need to have some say about what they're doing, to feel "self-determining."[44] "When children believe that they can exert control over success in school, they perform better on cognitive tasks. And, when children succeed in school, they are more likely to view school performance as a controllable outcome."[45] Turning performance into something that feels coerced interrupts this constructive cycle and exacerbates the damage. It's bad enough to get kids thinking mostly about how well they're doing; it's worse to get them thinking about how well they've *got* to be doing. To look at school from the student's point of view is to understand "the importance of keeping the pressure off."[46]

The second way of increasing the destructive potential of a performance orientation is to get students thinking not just about how well they're doing, but how well they're doing *compared to everyone else.* Learning doesn't stand a chance when the point is to keep up with, or triumph over, other students. Now we're two steps away from where we should be. The idea isn't for students to understand or even for them to perform well. The idea is for them to win.

The difference between learning and achievement is hard enough to grasp; the difference between doing well and doing better than others is especially confusing in a society so obsessed with being Number One that the ideas of excellence and winning have been thoroughly conflated. Witness all the talk about how schools and organizations need to become more "competitive"—as though that was synonymous with "quality." (Not only is it not synonymous; it's often not even compatible.) I have discussed this topic at length elsewhere[47] and will resist the temptation to belabor the point here. Still, it's worth pointing out that some of the analysis and evidence already cited in this chapter have either incorporated competition into the concept of high performance or have found that competition is the most destructive way to define performance.

If we want our children to "develop or exercise their powers as fully as possible or to accomplish as much as they can," said the late educational psychologist John Nicholls, then "it would be irrational for us to promote competitive or publicly evaluative educational environments."[48] Thus, letter and number grades are bad enough, but grading students on a curve, or ranking them against one another, is an abomination. Standardized testing (as we'll see later) is a major impediment to improving schools, but "norm-referenced" tests, where students are compared not to a standard but to one another, is counterproductive in the extreme. Awards assemblies, spelling bees and similar contests, "Who can tell

me . . . ?" questions asked of the whole class (where the point is to be the first with the right answer), posted charts of students' relative standing—all of these practices exact a terrible price even from the students who win. Winners and losers alike are made to think they're competent and valuable only to the extent that they've defeated others. Winners and losers alike come to distrust and resent their peers, since the central lesson of all competition is that other people are obstacles to their own success. Winners and losers alike are apt to lose interest in the learning itself and to learn less effectively.

The research supporting these claims is there for anyone who cares to find it. These studies show quite clearly that

- students who have come to equate success with doing better than others are more likely to think in a "surface-level" way,[49]
- students are more likely to attribute the results of a competition to factors outside their control (compared with how they explain noncompetitive success or failure),[50]
- a competitive learning environment causes students to dislike school and show less interest in a given subject,[51]
- people of different abilities tend to learn more effectively on a range of tasks when they're able to cooperate with one another than when they're trying to defeat one another,[52]

and so on and so on. If competition were a consumer product rather than an ideology, it would have been banned long ago.

To say this is not to imply that we think kids are equally good at everything.[53] Rather, it means that we understand the difference between quality and victory. As a parent, I'm naturally interested in, though I hope not obsessed with, how successfully my daughter is learning. But it is neither legitimate nor helpful for me to want to know how she's doing compared to everyone else in class—and frankly, I have no business asking. Some reference point, of course, is required to gauge her progress, and I expect that experience with many other students over the years indirectly contributes to an educator's judgment about whether there's any reason for me to be concerned about my daughter. But that's very different from wanting to rank the students in a given class.* It may be unrealistic to ignore the differences between them, but it is positively utopian to think we can emphasize competitive performance while still valuing learning.

* I once met an elementary school teacher who said that when parents insist on such comparisons, she confides to them, "You know, [your child] is the best in the class!" Then, after a pause, she muses, "Of course, this is the dumbest class I've ever had." Apart from its wit, her answer nicely points up just how useless such rankings really are.

Thus far, I've mentioned two ways in which making students preoccupied with how well they're doing can be made even more harmful: by increasing control and by introducing competition. The third method of making things worse is by emphasizing failure rather than success. In the last few years, some psychologists have been arguing that there are actually two kinds of performance orientation, one where the point is to show how good you are and the other where the point is to show how bad you're not. They contend that the latter is the worst possible goal. People who are put in the position of trying to escape failure may work hard and get things done, but they're especially likely to fall victim to everything discussed in this chapter: they lose interest in what they're doing, go out of their way to avoid difficult tasks, get thrown for a loop when they do fail, and attribute that failure to a lack of ability.[54]

While trying to escape failure is a particularly unproductive goal for a student, perhaps we should pause to reflect on how the experience of actually failing is also bad news. Wanting to help kids learn to deal with failure in a healthy way is not an argument for making them fail more often than necessary. Subjecting children to unusually difficult assignments, concepts beyond their grasp, very tough grading, and other gratuitous causes of failure simply is not a sensible strategy. It shouldn't be necessary to point this out, but there are actually people walking around—some of whom come into contact with children on a regular basis—who talk like this: "Once upon a time . . . you passed or you failed. You made the team or you didn't. If you fell short, if your ego was bruised by getting a D or by seeing your name on the cut list, then you buckled down and you made it next time and felt good about yourself. . . . Failure can be a terrific motivator."[55]

It is difficult to imagine a point of view more at variance with everything we know about motivation and learning. While it can be useful, even necessary, to give students some feedback on their efforts, teachers who cover a student's paper with corrections often aren't upholding high standards so much as a chilly sort of perfectionism that ignores its real effects on real people. Look at it from the student's point of view. Does he say to himself, "Well, it appears that this essay on which I worked so hard is a worthless piece of trash and that I can't write a single sentence that the teacher likes. But, gosh darn it, this failure is just going to motivate me to try even harder next time and reach excellence!"?

We may want children to rebound from failure, but wanting does not automatically make it true. For students to do serious thinking, they have to "feel confident in their ability to make sense of problematic situations," one researcher explains.[56] And the source of that confidence? "To a large extent," writes another psychologist, "perceived competence comes

from success experiences."[57] Doing well doesn't guarantee that one will have that faith in oneself (especially if the success is attributed to inborn ability), and having faith in oneself doesn't guarantee high levels of achievement.[58] But the experience of screwing up is a poorer bet by orders of magnitude.

When children fail at a task, the most likely result, all things being equal,[59] is that they'll expect to do poorly on similar tasks in the future,[60] and this expectation, as we've seen, can set a self-fulfilling prophecy into motion. Thus, because failure can engender a feeling of incompetence (if not helplessness), future levels of achievement are compromised. Indeed, a bundle of research suggests that kids who fail at something are less likely to succeed the next time—even if they're perfectly capable of completing the second task.[61]

Moreover, repeated or unexpected or especially significant failure can lead to those other consequences we keep coming across: avoiding challenging tasks,[62] losing interest in the task,[63] and thinking in terms of ability rather than effort.[64] Even those students who really do buckle down and try harder when they fail—the supposed success stories of traditional methods—may be doing so out of an anxious, compulsive pressure to feel better about themselves rather than because they enjoy learning.[65] They may manage to understand what they're reading today, but they may not want to read tomorrow.