

THE DOCUMENTARY

RACE TO NOWHERE

THE DARK SIDE OF AMERICA'S ACHIEVEMENT CULTURE

A film by Vicki Abeles



REEL LINK FILMS

US | 2010 | DCP | 85 mins | PG-13 | Closed Captioned in English | Spanish & Mandarin Subtitles

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RACE TO NOWHERE

SHORT SYNOPSIS

A concerned mother turned filmmaker aims her camera at the culture of hollow achievement and pressure to perform that has invaded America's schools. It is destroying our children's love of learning and feeding an epidemic of unprepared, disengaged, and unhealthy students.

This remarkable new film shines a light on the price our kids pay for this "race to nowhere." Cheating is commonplace, stress-related illness, depression and burnout are rampant, and ironically, young people arrive at college and the workplace unprepared and uninspired.

Featuring the heartbreaking stories of young people who have been pushed to the brink, educators who are burned out and worried that students aren't developing the skills needed for the global economy, "Race to Nowhere" points to the silent epidemic running rampant in our schools.

"Race to Nowhere" is a call to families, educators, experts and policy makers to examine current assumptions on how to best prepare the youth of America to become healthy, bright, contributing and leading citizens in the 21st century.

Among many others, "Race to Nowhere" features Dr. Madeline Levine, author of the best-sellers, *The Price of Privilege* and *Teach Your Children Well*, Dr. Deborah Stipek, former Dean of the Stanford School of Education, Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg, an adolescent medicine specialist at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Dr. Wendy Mogel, author of *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* and *The Blessing of a B Minus*, Denise Pope, author of *Doing School*, and Sara Bennett, author of *The Case Against Homework*.

RACE TO NOWHERE

IN THE PRESS – PRAISE

“Every once in a while, a film comes along that has the potential to change the culture. “Race to Nowhere” shines a light on the crisis of learning and meaning facing American education. The film is both a call to arms and a beacon of hope, a source of relief and outrage and a way forward for all of us.”

— Rachel Simmons, co-founder of the Girls Leadership Institute and author of “The Curse of the Good Girl.”

“The Race to Nowhere is another inconvenient truth. It’s a wake-up call to all of us who care about children, the purpose of schools, and how we define success in American education. And, importantly, it provides viewers with excellent, actionable suggestions of how to begin to address change locally in our schools.”

— The George Lucas Educational Foundation

“Riveted to this disturbing tableau were more than 300 parents and educators, including Elise Browne Hughes, 46, who wiped away tears one recent evening in Bethesda while watching the documentary “Race to Nowhere,” which is becoming a growing grassroots phenomenon in the achievement-minded Washington area and beyond. “It’s in the culture, and it kind of feeds on itself,” said Hughes, a mother of two sons who paid \$10 for a ticket and braved the heavy rain to watch the film at Walt Whitman High School. For her and thousands of others nationwide, the film has raised difficult questions about how to raise well-adjusted children at a time when schools seem test-obsessed, advanced classes are the norm and parents worry that their children will not go as far in life as they have.”

— Donna St. George, The Washington Post

“I interviewed Vicki Abeles on my web show today and was struck by her message. ‘Schools are not factories’, she argues, ‘and children aren’t products to be fixed and tested.’ Over-scheduled, stressed-out kids aren’t just less competitive, they are miserable. One study found that 15% of U.S. high school students had seriously considered suicide. This film is a poignant reminder that straight A’s and high SAT scores are not the Holy Grail. We all want our kids to excel, but I’d take a happy child over a ‘depressed success’ any day of the week.”

— Katie Couric, former CBS News Anchor

“Fathers, everywhere — please see this film. There are so many parenting issues where the torch is being carried by the moms alone, and the dads are merely roped in. The issues raised in ‘Race to Nowhere’ are too important; we need to see it, talk about it, and deal with it. It’ll take a collective effort to create communities around our children where they are not so destroyed by a single failure, where they don’t feel every single act is being judged by admissions officers, and where they are free to still be kids.”

— Po Bronson, co-author of NurtureShock: New Thinking About Children

“If Obama really wants to help promote education films, he could take a look at “Race to Nowhere,” a documentary that isn’t backed by a Gates grant but explores the strains of competing in a pressure-packed academic culture that is highly test-driven and pushes some students to the edge. His time would better be spent by talking to education experts who aren’t enamored with his policies and using his extraordinary intellect to come to understand how he is getting education so wrong.”

— Valerie Strauss, The Washington Post

continues

IN THE PRESS, CONTINUED

"Spurred by the medical and emotional problems of her own three children, Ms. Abeles embarked on a deeply personal inquiry into the insanely hectic lives of too many of our offspring. Rushing from class to sports practice, from community work to homework, and relying increasingly on stimulants and sleep deprivation, these kids seem more pressured than the average C.E.O. Documenting consequences that range from depression to eating disorders to suicide, the film's medical professionals share Ms. Abeles' alarm and her awareness that blame, if it exists, is systemic and with little current incentive to change. Admirably conveys the complexity of the issue with considerably more compassion than prescription."

— Jeannette Catsoulis, The New York Times

"Raises important questions that educators and parents must confront... a provocative, conversation starter of a film."

— Daniel Pink, Author of Drive and A Whole New Mind

"A growing grass-roots phenomenon"

— Donna St. George, Washington Post

"A dire warning and solid piece of advocacy journalism."

— Sheri Linden, Los Angeles Times

"An education film that gets it (No, not 'Superman'). Chronicles the price kids are paying emotionally for the increased emphasis on test scores."

— Valerie Strauss, Washington Post

"A compelling film about the stress that kids today experience because of high stakes testing."

— Diane Ravitch, former Assistant U.S. Secretary of Education

"I promise you that this movie is telling the truth ... 'Race to Nowhere' conveys important messages with power."

— John Merrow, correspondent for PBS Newshour, writing for The Huffington Post

"You'll be inspired to make some changes, big and small, for the health of your kids."

— Lian Dolan, Oprah.com

"Go see this film...and help stop the insanity!"

— Danny Miller, The Huffington Post

"You should see this film."

— Marc Bousquet, The Chronicle of Higher Education

"Required viewing."

— Annlee Ellingson, Moving Pictures Magazine

continues

IN THE PRESS, CONTINUED

“Race to Nowhere” spotlights the intersection of health and education and gives voice to those on the front lines — the students and teachers themselves.”

— The Santa Maria Times

“A call to mobilize families, educators and policymakers to help disprove the notion that the educational system is ‘one-size-fits-all.’”

—J. Weekly, Jewish Weekly Newspaper of Northern CA

RACE TO NOWHERE

LONG SYNOPSIS

The generation of the 21st Century is faced with more complex, global problems than any previous age. Potentially devastating environmental, economic and social challenges abound. Parents today are expected to raise high-achieving children, skilled in a multitude of talents, all at the highest levels, to respond to these challenges. Bombarded by academic standards, competition for educational opportunities, and run-away schedules, young people struggle to accommodate the intense demands.

After a series of wake up calls in her family and the devastating loss of a young woman's life, concerned mom and filmmaker Vicki Abeles, picks up the camera to make a difference. By chronicling her own family's intense schedule, she takes the viewer on an intimate journey into the center of the daily struggle to balance academic commitments and cultural expectations, with healthy personal needs.

From nights at the dinner table doing homework, to the desks of education and child psychology experts, Ms. Abeles' camera take us straight into the heart of the question, "Given current education modalities, (the pressure for test scores, over-scheduled lives of young people, highly competitive parental pressure, disenfranchised student populations and teachers stretched to their limits), are we preparing our children to become the healthy and bright world leaders that we need for the future?"

"Race to Nowhere" is the story of what happens when, through healthy, normal, developmental needs, a gap develops between inner needs and the high stakes, unyielding demands of today's preparation for young people to enter society. It is a groundbreaking documentary feature film that examines the colossal price being paid by today's students for the achievement-obsessed way of life that permeates America.

Abeles takes viewers to schools across the country to feature the stories of students who have been pushed to the brink, educators who are burnt out and worried students aren't learning anything substantive and college professors and business leaders, concerned the incoming young people lack the skills needed to succeed in the 21st century. The stories of several young people, parents, and a teacher are intercut with scenes of family life and in-depth interviews with top experts in education, medicine, and psychology — providing a deep and varied context that underscores the enormity of a potentially looming crisis.

Today competitive, self-assured, achievement-oriented, young people prepare relentlessly to enter a culture that demands nothing less than their personal best, all day, every day. From preschool through college, children are pressured, pushed, coached, sculpted, scheduled and reviewed, running a never-ending gauntlet towards adulthood.

What happens when personal best is not good enough? What happens when personal best changes into personal nightmare? The unintended consequences of an achievement-obsessed culture can be catastrophic for families and children alike. The mental health of young people may suffer, leading to depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, self-mutilation, and suicide — not to mention binge drinking, self-medication and drug abuse. We are graduating a generation of young people who have been trained as robo-students, unable to think and work independently, creatively, and collaboratively and who are returning home after college in increasing numbers. Industry is spending billions retraining these graduates.

Shot in gritty cinema verité, as well as sophisticated documentary style, "Race to Nowhere" is a far-reaching, in-depth profile of childhood and education, which underscores the urgency with which adults must address this looming crisis.

RACE TO NOWHERE

FILMMAKER'S NOTES

Six years ago my only knowledge of film came from buying tickets at the box office and going to see a movie with my kids. "Race to Nowhere" was inspired by a series of wake-up calls that made me look closely at the relentless pressure to perform that children face today.

I saw the strain in my children as they navigated days filled with school, homework, tutoring, and extracurricular activities. But it wasn't until the crisis of my 12-year-old daughter being diagnosed with a stress-induced condition that I was determined to do something. After months of long evenings battling homework assignments, studying for tests and panic attacks in the middle of the night, we found her doubled over in pain, and rushed her to the emergency room. Her cheerful façade and determination to keep up had masked her symptoms to us, to her friends, and to her teachers.

I started to make some changes in my home, but the pressures on my children and family felt more systemic and beyond my control. In thinking about my own childhood, it seemed that education hadn't changed much in the past 30 years, but today's system is driven by a high-stakes, high-pressure culture.

In trying to understand what was driving those pressures, I began speaking to experts. I was stunned to learn of the soaring rates of youth depression, suicide, cheating, and dropping out in all types of communities. I spoke with students and their families and teachers across the country, and realized how widespread the problems were, crossing economic and geographic lines — and how powerless they felt in the face of current education policies focused on high stakes tests and competitive college admissions.

This problem was affecting millions of kids and yet it wasn't being talked about.

I wanted to do something to raise awareness on a large scale, and to bring communities together to galvanize change. Film had always been a powerful force in my life, so I decided the best way to raise awareness on a large scale was to make a film that clearly captured these stories and issues. I was determined to give voice to those on the front lines of education — students and teachers.

So I picked up a camera and began to assemble a team of film professionals.

After interviewing students, parents and teachers, I met with top education and child development experts at Stanford University and other leading institutions.

One of the high school pupils I talked to, Natan, gave us the film's title when he said it's like students "get caught up in a race to nowhere."

Several months into the development of the film, without any warning signs, a 13-year-old girl in our community committed suicide after getting a poor grade on a math test, adding urgency to the need for change.

Childhood has become indentured to test scores, performance and competition. We are creating a generation of unhealthy, disengaged, unprepared youth trying to manage as best they can.

We cannot keep silent any longer. If I don't speak out and share these stories, who will? And if not now, when?

We cannot wait for large institutions or the government to make the changes our kids need today, Political and corporate interests should not drive education. There's too much evidence that this system isn't working for any of our kids. Layers of change are needed, starting from the ground up. It is important for us to join together to change the system and our culture. Together we must safeguard the health of our children and ensure that they all receive an education that allows them to reach their full potential.

— Vicki Abeles

RACE TO NOWHERE

EXHIBITION AND CREDITS

Exhibition Format: HDCAM, Digibeta, DCP, DVD 85 minutes

Sound Format: Dolby Stereo

Theatrical Premiere: IFC Center, September 10, 2010

Broadcast Premiere: Public Television, Fall 2014

A Production of.....Reel Link Films

A Film byVicki Abeles

EditorJessica Congdon

CinematographerSophie Constantinou, Mark Smith &
Maimone Attia

MusicMark Adler

RACE TO NOWHERE

DISTRIBUTION

Named in 2012 by Take Part as one of “the 10 education documentaries you don’t want to miss”, “Race to Nowhere” has seen the most successful semi-theatrical run a documentary has ever experienced, playing in over 7,000 schools, theaters, and community venues in all fifty states and more than thirty countries.

Called a “must-see movie” by The New York Times and “a growing grassroots phenomenon” by the Washington Post, screenings of “Race to Nowhere” have provided a forum for schools and communities to discuss the pressure-cooker climate that dominates American classrooms. A town hall discussion follows each screening, making the film an active centerpiece for a fast-growing movement to reinvent education.

Slate.com called the film, “... the stealth juggernaut... a powerful alarming documentary that’s riling up parents across the country.”

“When you encourage audiences to engage with film not as consumers but as activists and stakeholders, you begin to see the incredible power of documentary to effect change in our communities,” Abeles says. The extended screening campaign is part of a deliberate strategy to enhance real-time, community engagement with the film to inspire awareness, dialogue and action.

The film has succeeded in exposing how high-stakes testing, college admissions and a cyclical trap of busyness and competition have led to an epidemic of anxious, overworked, unhealthy and unprepared young people.

Through the film and the related social action campaign, a new dialogue has emerged and individuals and communities are beginning to create a vision for change around the issues shaping our children’s lives and education. The team behind “Race to Nowhere” has launched several initiatives which — together with the film — have ignited change in hundreds of schools and districts.

RACE TO NOWHERE

CAMPAIGNS & IMPACT

Thousands of schools have used the film to jump-start conversation about homework policies, testing practices, schools schedules, healthy balance for students, college admission, AP courses, tutoring, and academic integrity. Many of these have implemented significant changes in the wake of their screenings — from Walter Payton High School in Chicago, which eliminated all homework over holiday breaks, to The Emery-Weiner School in Houston, which has shifted to a later school start time.

Director, Vicki Abeles, says these kinds of adjustments are crucial if we are to raise children who are confident, contributing, healthy citizens. The social action campaign aims to go much further. “For truly revolutionizing change to happen in our schools and families,” she says, “we need to all come together, community by community, to say that our children’s well-being comes first — and well before the ‘perfect’ college acceptance, before the championship soccer game, before the straight-A report card. We need to rally together as a whole community of parents, coaches, educators, administrators, lawmakers and students to upend our cultural definitions of ‘success’ and ‘achievement’ to include health, resilience, curiosity, relationships... all the intangibles of a meaningful and rewarding childhood and adulthood.”

HEALTHY HOMEWORK GUIDELINES

In June 2012, “Race to Nowhere” director Vicki Abeles joined with education and homework experts Alfie Kohn (author, *The Homework Myth*), Dr. Etta Kralovec (Associate Professor, Univ. of Arizona and co-author, *The End of Homework*) and Sara Bennett (co-author, *The Case Against Homework*) to launch a national online petition on Change.org, urging the National PTA to adopt a set of homework guidelines that schools across the country could implement locally in an effort to realign homework policy and practice with the best research on student learning, health and engagement. Tens of thousands of individuals signed the petition and the team behind the petition was invited to present at the PTA’s National Convention.

Schools are using the Healthy Homework Guidelines to create local change. Inspired by “Race to Nowhere” and Alfie Kohn’s research, Cardiff Elementary School in San Diego, California created a homework task force and adopted a new policy that mirrors much of the healthy homework guidelines. After hearing about Cardiff’s new policy, other schools are following suit and using the Healthy Homework Guidelines to inform their homework policies.

Inspired by “Race to Nowhere,” a school district in Burbank, California created a homework task force that submitted a resolution on homework to the California PTA. In May 2014 the California PTA adopted the resolution.

SLEEP AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

In the spring of 2012 “Race to Nowhere” streamed the film to more than 1,000 medical professionals and dozens of schools have added later start times allowing students to get the sleep their bodies and minds need and providing more time for collaboration among teachers.

COLLEGE SCREENING CAMPAIGN

“Race to Nowhere” has been screened at hundreds of colleges and universities reaching students, professors, admissions officers and health and wellness centers and professionals.

TESTING

The team behind “Race to Nowhere” joined other leading organizations and experts including Diane Ravitch, former Assistant Secretary of Education and FairTest.org in sponsoring a National Resolution on High-Stakes Testing which calls on federal and state policymakers to reduce standardized test mandates and base school accountability on multiple forms of measurement.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM SCHOOLS

The film has ignited change in hundreds of schools and districts where “Race to Nowhere” has been screened, including:

- Ridgewood High School in New Jersey, which has addressed homework, healthy balance and later start times. The school also created a student advisory to the principal. Other schools in the district have followed Ridgewood’s lead and have created homework-free holiday breaks.
- Great Neck High School on Long Island — site of the SAT cheating scandals in 2012 — eliminated all homework over Thanksgiving break.
- Walter Payton High School in Chicago, Illinois, which eliminated homework over holiday breaks and is working to implement many additional changes.
- Wellesley Middle School in Wellesley, Massachusetts, which has committed to a no-homework policy on religious holidays or school vacations.
- Galloway School District in Galloway, New Jersey, whose superintendent has proposed a ban on assignments on weekends, holidays and school vacations.
- Ridgefield High School in Ridgefield, New Jersey, which shifted to block scheduling.
- Potomac School in Montana which created a new four-day-week schedule and eliminated homework for all grades.
- St. Mary’s High School in California moved to later start times, a block schedule and inclusion of social and emotional learning in the curriculum. This year they are working to address assessments, AP classes and homework.

RACE TO NOWHERE

KEY SUBJECTS

Natalie

From a young age, Natalie attended private school and was expected to do well in all of her pursuits: school, sports, and Hebrew lessons. In high school, she had so much homework and so many tests that the only way she could keep up with everything was to work all night. She discovered a trick to staying awake: not eating gave her insomnia. During her sophomore year she was diagnosed as anorexic.

Sam

Sam attended suburban public schools in a school district where the expectations are high and the pressure is intense. He felt overwhelmed with schoolwork as early as elementary school. In high school, he enrolled in challenging classes and joined the wrestling team. In the end, it was all too much for him.

Jamey

Jamey used to love school, but in 6th grade she found it difficult to keep with all the work. She began getting up in the middle of the night to finish her homework. As the workload increased in 7th grade, Jamey fell further behind. She felt she wasn't smart and that she was disappointing everyone. Her mom noticed signs of depression, but all of Jamey's teachers declared, "she looked fine".

Isaiah

In middle school, Isaiah was the guy all the other students turned to for help with their homework. He was a 4.0 student. He felt successful. In his urban high school, he took AP classes so he could apply to top colleges and a wide range of scholarships. He needed the scholarships because his mom couldn't afford to send him to a four-year school. As he progressed through high school he became overwhelmed by his workload and fell behind. His grades dropped and he considered dropping out.

Jarreau

Jarreau had top grades in high school — partially because he figured out how to work the system. It was all just a matter of memorizing information and spitting it back out. He would cram the night before a test so the material was fresh in his mind. For Jarreau, that strategy worked. He was accepted into Stanford University, yet struggled as a freshman.

Ally

In middle school, Ally was a top student with a strong interest in the arts. When she entered high school in Carmel, Indiana, she was working towards an academic honors diploma, which would help her get into a good college. In 10th grade, she struggled in math and lost her academic honors diploma. She began to feel she was a failure at everything. She stopped trying in school, because, as she puts it, "if you don't try, you can't fail".

Emma

When Emma first started teaching in Oakland public schools, she hoped to inspire her students to embrace learning and pursue a college education. She came up with innovative ways of presenting material she felt was accessible and engaging. But the district pressured her to teach to the standards. That meant giving her students tests they always performed poorly on; assigning work that required memorization as opposed to critical thinking. After 5 years of struggling against the district, Emma is beginning to feel like she's fighting a losing battle.

KEY SUBJECTS, CONTINUED

Darrick

For 9 years, Darrick was one of the most innovative teachers in the Oakland Public School district. He set up a character-building program designed to give students a voice and inspire them to become active participants in social change. The program inspired countless students to attend college and pursue ambitious careers. Darrick is now a teacher and administrator at a small urban school in San Francisco. Instructor, motivational speaker, and homespun philosopher, Darrick is keenly aware of America's narrow definition of success and how it damages children.

Jane Marvin

Jane Marvin is a caring mother, and human resources professional. In February 2008, her daughter, Devon, committed suicide at the age of 13. Since then, Jane has struggled to cope with her loss and to find out what signs, if any, she and her husband might have missed. Jane is committed to sharing Devon's story widely so that other parents are more aware of the stress their children may feel — even if they don't show it.

Vicki

Vicki learned at an early age that the key to success is hard work and a good education. Raised by a struggling, single mom who encouraged her children to attend graduate school, she worked her way up from nothing to become a successful attorney and businesswoman. As a mother, Vicki wanted her children to have all the opportunities she lacked growing up. But when her daughters reached middle school, they were overwhelmed by pressure from classes and extra-curriculars. When one became physically sick, she and her husband realized they had to rethink the way they were raising and educating their children. Vicki took it upon herself to find out how our broken education system harms both children and adults, and what we can do to change it. It is this investigation that is depicted in this film. Vicki is the co-director of "Race to Nowhere."

Deborah Stipek, Ph.D.

Stipek is the former James Quillen Dean and Professor of Education at Stanford University. Her doctorate is from Yale University in developmental psychology. Her scholarship concerns instructional effects on children's achievement motivation, early childhood education, elementary education and school reform. She served for five years on the Board on Children, Youth, and Families of the National Academy of Sciences and is a member of the National Academy of Education. She also chaired the National Academy of Sciences Committee on Increasing High School Students' Engagement & Motivation to Learn and the MacArthur Foundation Network on Teaching and Learning. Dr. Stipek served 10 of her 23 years at UCLA as Director of the Corinne Seeds University Elementary School and the Urban Education Studies Center. She joined the Stanford School of Education as Dean and Professor of Education in January 2001.

In the film, she illuminates the flaws of the American education system, and explains what can be done to address them. She also describes why schools in other countries are more effective than the ones in America. Dr. Stipek assures us these problems can be fixed — but if they're not, our country as a whole, will suffer.

Dr. Ken Ginsburg

Dr. Ken Ginsburg is an adolescent medicine specialist at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, an American Academy of Pediatrics spokesperson and co-author of the book "Less Stress, More Success." Dr. Ginsburg explains in the film that "the common force that drives kids toward so many negative behaviors

is stress.” Drawing from his own experiences as a father, Dr. Ginsburg admits that parents today face a dilemma: Should they minimize their children’s stress, or encourage them to attend a good college? It seems it is impossible to do both. The solution Dr. Ginsburg suggests for everyone is to redefine success and get off the treadmill together.

Dr. Madeline Levine

Madeline Levine is a nationally known psychologist with over 25 years of experience as a clinician, consultant, and educator. She is the author of two New York Times best-selling books, *The Price of Privilege*, and *Teach Your Children Well*, both published by Harper Collins. She is also a co-founder of Challenge Success.

Denise Pope

Denise Pope is a senior lecturer at the Stanford University School of Education. For the past ten years, she has specialized in student engagement, curriculum studies, qualitative research methods, and service learning. She is the author of “Doing School: How we are creating a generation of stressed out, materialistic, and mis-educated students.” She is co-founder of Challenge Success, a national research and intervention project that aims to reduce unhealthy pressure on youth and champions a broader vision of youth success. Challenge Success is an expanded version of the Stressed Out Students program that Dr. Pope founded and directed from 2003-2008. She lectures nationally on parenting techniques and pedagogical strategies to increase student health, engagement with learning, and integrity.

Sara Bennett

Sara Bennett is the co-author of “The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It” and the founder of Stop Homework, a not-for-profit project devoted to changing homework policy and practice, that is affiliated with The Alliance for Childhood. Sara has a 17-year-old son and a 14-year-old daughter, and she has been an anti-homework activist from the time her older child entered first grade. A former criminal appeals attorney and the first chairperson of the Wrongful Convictions Project of the Legal Aid Society, Sara has successfully helped parents advocate for homework reform in their own communities, and she has counseled teachers, administrators, and School Board members on ways to change homework practices.

Dr. Wendy Mogel

Dr. Wendy Mogel is an internationally known clinical psychologist, author, and public speaker. *Publisher’s Weekly* gave her New York Times best-selling parenting book, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*, a starred review saying, “Impassioned, lyrical and eminently practical, this volume is a real treasure.” A graduate of Middlebury College, Dr. Mogel completed an internship and post-doctoral fellowship in the Department of Psychiatry at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. She has been a keynote speaker at the annual meetings of the National Association of Independent Schools, the National Association of Principals of Schools for Girls, the Educational Records Bureau, the National Association of Episcopal Schools, the American Montessori Society, and the American Camp Association. She serves on the boards of the Center for Early Education and the Counsel for Spiritual and Ethical Education — a century-old inter-faith organization serving private schools. She contributes articles to many types of publications including *Independent School Magazine*, the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, and *Camping Magazine*.

In 2006, *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* published a profile story on Dr. Mogel and her work. In 2010, Scribner published her book about raising teenagers in a nervous world, *The Blessing of a B Minus*.

RACE TO NOWHERE

ABOUT THE FILM TEAM

Vicki Abeles, Producer, Writer and Co-Director

Vicki Abeles is a filmmaker, speaker, and advocate for children and families. Abeles began her career as a Wall Street attorney and turned filmmaker in 2007 when she began to take note of a disturbing trend in her San Francisco Bay Area community. Everywhere, it seemed, families, teachers and children were wrestling with a silent epidemic of school stress and academic burnout. Abeles was moved to pick up a camera and begin what would become a two-year investigation into the nationwide problem of America's pressure-cooker culture and education system — and the dangerous toll it takes on children and their families.

She co-directed "Race to Nowhere", a film that has ignited a movement to reinvent education and reclaim healthy childhood. Using a cutting-edge community distribution model that has showcased the film in more than 7,000 community-sponsored screenings, Abeles has brought "Race to Nowhere" to more than 1 million viewers around the world. Abeles launched a social action campaign committed to providing resources and tools to support awareness, dialogue and community action connected to the issues raised by the film. Abeles is also co-author of the End the Race Companion Book.

Abeles is currently in production on an education documentary featuring leaders and schools at the vanguard of educational reform. She is also working on a book to be published by Simon & Schuster and is a regular blogger for Huffington Post and contributor to The New York Times and The Washington Post. Additional credits include Associate Producer on the Sundance favorite "Miss Representation."

Jessica Congdon, Editor, Writer and Co-Director

Jessica Congdon has worked as a commercial and feature film editor for a wide range of award-winning titles, including "Miss Representation", "Motherland", "Speed and Angels", "Dopamine", and "Her Minor Thing". Her commercial work includes music videos and national and international television campaigns for Nokia, Bugaboo, Hilton, Hitachi, Budweiser, Isuzu, Nike, Saturn, Pepsi, Procter & Gamble, and Adidas. The NBC11 Illuminating campaign, edited by Congdon and directed by Ron Fricke, won an Emmy in 2005.

Mark Adler, Composer

Composer Mark Adler's recent projects include "Food, Inc." produced by Robert Kenner and Eric Schlosser, and "Bottle Shock," starring Alan Rickman and Chris Pine. He won a Primetime Emmy for his work on HBO's "The Rat Pack" and was nominated for "Forbidden Territory: Stanley's Search for Livingstone," starring Nigel Hawthorne. Other projects include scores for over 40 documentaries (including numerous National Geographic Specials) and numerous TV movies (among them two for Hallmark Hall of Fame). He also composed the theme for the PBS series, "American Experience." Feature film scores include Paramount Classics "Focus," based on Arthur Miller's novel and starring William H. Macy and Laura Dern, the Miramax film "Picture Bride," Wayne Wang's "Eat A Bowl of Tea" and three Oscar-nominated feature documentaries. In addition to his composing work, Mark is currently touring with the Donna Jean Godchaux Band on keyboards and vocals. He attended elementary school in Mill Valley, where he first fell in love with movies at the Sequoia Theater.

Maimone Attia, Cinematographer and Writer

Maimone Attia is a children's entertainer, freelance videographer, and short-film filmmaker. He studied creative writing, film production and critical studies at the University of Southern California, from which he received a B.A. in Cinema-Television.

Sophie Constantinou, Cinematographer and Consulting Director

Sophie's work has earned international acclaim for tackling difficult topics with artistry and sensitivity. She has produced, directed and photographed several award-winning documentaries, including "Divided Loyalties," an intensely personal, feature-length exploration of the conflict in Cyprus (Golden Gate Award, 1999); "Between the Lines," about women and self-injury (Golden Gate Award, 1998); and "Impact Zone" (Best Experimental Film, NY Underground Film Festival, 1997.) Specializing in alluring, formally dramatic lighting design as well as improvised observational camerawork, Sophie has been shooting high-profile documentary films for over a decade. Her cinematography credits include HBO's "Unchained Memories," PBS' "Presumed Guilty", and KQED's Emmy Award winning "Home Front." She received her BA in Film Studies from the University of California at Berkeley and a Master's from San Francisco State University. She teaches cinematography and directing at the City College of San Francisco and has been mentoring at-risk youth in filmmaking and cinematography for much of the past decade.

Sara Truebridge, Ed.D., Education Consultant

Sara Truebridge is an Education Consultant who combines her experience and expertise in the areas of education policy, practice and research to promote success and equity for all. She formally was a Research Associate with WestEd researching, authoring, and presenting best practices in the field of prevention and resilience as it relates to education, school climate, and youth development theory, policy and practice. Sara has consulted and given numerous presentations and workshops throughout the United States from a strengths-based perspective focusing on resilience and positive youth/human development theory, policy and practice to enhance positive school climate, teaching, learning, health, and safety. Sara currently is contracted by Teachers College Press to write a book on resilience, beliefs, and education.

After 20 years of credentialed classroom experience ranging from pre-kindergarten to high school, Sara was Founder and President of Sincerely, Kids Inc.®, a child-centered consulting firm providing Educational C.A.R.E. — Consulting, Advocacy, Resources, and Education. Prior to teaching, she was the Legislative Analyst for education in the New York State Senate. Sara earned her Ed.D. and M.A. from Mills College and a B.A. from Denison University. She holds certificates from Harvard Graduate School of Education's program, Closing the Achievement Gap and UC Berkeley's program, Children and the Changing Family. Sara is one of two international recipients of the 2005 Howard M. Soule Fellowship for Doctoral Studies: a Phi Delta Kappa Graduate Fellowship in Educational Leadership.

Steve Relova, Development Director

Steve Relova is the Creative Director of a San Francisco Bay Area Television Station where he has worked for over 20 years. In his tenure there, he's produced and written for news, sports, travel, special and live programming and documentaries. He's received awards from the National Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Radio Television News Director's Association for documentary and special programming featuring stories ranging from the struggle of disenfranchised students to animal rights. He's worked on projects with hundreds of local and national non-profit organizations and has served on several non-profit boards. He supported himself through grad school by working as a reporter and photographer for several San Francisco Bay Area newspapers. He has a Masters degree in Film.

RACE TO NOWHERE

MORE INFORMATION

FILM FESTIVALS

- Alexandria Independent Film Festival, Audience Award winner
- Buffalo International Film Festival
- California Independent Film Festival
- Greater Reading Film Festival
- Mill Valley Film Festival
- Hamilton International Film Festival
- National Centre for Technology in Education Film Festival
- Okanagan International Film Festival in Canada
- Sonoma International Film Festival
- Reel Work Film Festival
- Oneota Film Festival
- Frozen River Film Festival
- AERA Film Festival
- Columbus International Film Festival
- BOOST Film Festival

ABOUT REEL LINK FILMS

Reel Link Films is a media organization established to produce and distribute films to bring critical awareness to the important issues of our times.

Reel Link Films believes in the power of story to educate, engage and inspire diverse audiences around the important issues of our times. Reel Link Films will continue to produce and distribute documentary films using the unique grassroots, community platform it has developed which reflects the organization's priority to engage audiences with film not as consumers but as activists and stakeholders. Reel Link Films also seeks to raise interest among the next generation in documentary films and the potential for positive impact of active media.

Reel Link Films' unique platform for distribution of documentary films in schools, libraries, universities, non-profit organizations and other educational settings allows for the incredible power of documentary to effect change in our communities.

ABOUT THE SOCIAL ACTION CAMPAIGN

The "Race to Nowhere" Team has formed a charity that serves as a response to audiences that have screened the film "Race to Nowhere" and seek advocacy and community-building resources to address the issues the film raises, including safeguarding the health and well-being of children and redefining cultural notions of success and achievement. The social action campaign provides resources and a support network for parents, families and educators seeking to measure educational achievement, not through evaluation, busywork and competition (e.g. testing, homework and college admissions), but instead through a child's successful embrace of personal challenge, a love of learning, and a sense of common purpose. The social action campaign has been established to help shift our collective mindset, inspire individual and community action and ultimately transform our educational culture so that every child is healthy, happy and supported as they reach their greatest potential.

RACE TO NOWHERE

CREDITS

Vicki Abeles

Jessica Congdon

Maimone Attia

Mark Adler

Sophie Constantinou

Eric Holland

Gary Coates

Jesse Spencer

David Weissman, Video Arts

James LaBrecht, Berkeley Sound Artists

Producer/co-director/writer

Editor/co-director/writer

Cinematographer/writer/additional directing

Original Music

Cinematography/consulting director

Additional music/ trailer and layout

Colorist

HD online editing and mastering

HD conversion and mastering facility

Sound design and mix

Reel Link Films would like to recognize the contribution of David Herschopf (1956-2009). David was instrumental as an advisor and supporter of "Race to Nowhere". He was a father, a friend, a dedicated teacher, and a tireless advocate for young people. This film was close to his heart and we salute his memory.

"Nobody Knows Me At All"

Performed by

The Weepies

Written by Deb Talan and Steve Tannen

Published by Deb Talan Music (ASCAP)/Steve

Tannen Music (BMI)

License courtesy of Netzwerk Productions

www.netzwerk.com

©2006 Netzwerk Productions from the album

"Say I Am You"

Additional Cinematography

Alec Boehm

Anthony Braun

Bob Kelley

Zico Orozco

Mark Smith

Brian Wells

Additional editing

Mario Escobar

Special thanks to everyone who participated

in filming:

All of the young people in the film and their families.

Nina Agabian

Ann Appert

Greg Biagini

Jarreau Bowen

Emma Batten-Bowman

Sara Bennett

Frtiz Blume

Anton Brammer

Kathy Bressler

Elizabeth Burstein

The Bryant Family

Jennifer Carlisle

Gwenly Carrel

Wes Carroll

The Castaner Family

Brad Choyt

Jay Chugh

Mary Crane

Avra Davidson

Kerry Dickinson

Paige Dudgeon

Dr. David Elkind

Alex Engs

The Faust Family

Barry Feld

Kristen Finley

Richard Fishbaugh

Bruce Fletcher

Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg

The Glassman Family

Matt Goldman

Matthew Haig

David Herschopf

Kirby Hoy

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Susan Kaplan	Dan Olmsted - Mixer
Cameron Kauffman	Patti Tauscher - Sound Editor
The Kallen Family	Alex Willmer - Sound Design
Tracy Hom Keyser	April Rodriguez - Sound Editor
The Kimball family	Jamie Branquinho - Sound Editor
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The Marvin Family	Karen Everett New Doc Editing
The McQuain Family	
Kevin Meyers	Story Consulting
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The Morris Family	Kerry Dickinson
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Michael Torres	Kim Westheimer
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The Witters Family	Sara Truebridge, Ed.D.
David Wu	Kerry Dickinson
The Zoger Family	
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David Weissman	
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Zacharia Pineda	Partners
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ARRI Relativity	Large Format Printing
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Jeff Chanley	Naming
	Maria Cypher
	Catchword Branding

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Courtesy ARRI

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Idle Hands

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Scott Harris Video Arts
Gabe Salgado

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Etopolos Graphic Design

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URL Builders

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Thought Equity

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Steve Lindhurst

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Kathy Bressler
Lafayette Academy
Rob and Stacy Kadesh
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Dublin, California
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Annette Levy, Head of School
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Kyoto, Japan
John Williams
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Richard Fishbaugh
Roosevelt Elementary School
San Leandro Unified School District
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Wheatley School
East Williston School District
Old Westbury, New York
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Blakely Braniff
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Denise Pope, Ph.D.
Sara Truebridge, Ed.D.

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Linda Brentals
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Jonathan Dern
Dagmar Dolby
Geraldyn Dreyfous
Cheri Facer
Joshua Feller
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RACE TO NOWHERE

TESTIMONIALS & AUDIENCE RESPONSES

"‘Race to Nowhere’ is a must-see documentary for parents, teachers and the young people we care for and work with, so that a new national dialogue can emerge around re-engineering school to meet its real purpose: to provide a supportive and nurturing environment for students to discover their passions and future without sacrificing their health, well-being, and youthfulness itself in the process."

- Patrick Bassett, President, National Association of Independent Schools

"A powerful and well-crafted reminder that the dubious benefits of a higher GPA must be weighed against real suffering and years that are lost forever." - Alfie Kohn, Author of *The Schools Our Children Deserve*

"I really feel the burden placed on students is not only detrimental, but short-sighted and even barbaric... I truly appreciate all the work and the excellent job you are doing with this! I intend to share the documentary with friends and family who haven't seen it. Thank you!" - David C., Parent, Nederland, CO

"The Prince of Wales was very grateful for a copy of your film ‘Race to Nowhere.’ The film provides a fascinating insight into some of the issues concerning education systems in the West and beyond — and the serious impact these can have on young people." - Wing Commander, Richard Pattle

"I thought about how frustrated I am when I listen to programs that just complain about problems but don't offer solutions. I'm always left feeling hopeless — what can I, as an individual do? The message of your film is: PLENTY, particularly if folks get together and come up with strategies that work for their community." - Lisa, Parent, Oakland, CA

"‘Race to Nowhere’ [gives us] a new vantage point regarding the extreme toll that this can take on kids and families. It takes a very concerted effort and the ability to prioritize, be able to say no, and let go of what other people think about what you are not doing. We left a very busy, Type A life behind! It was hard to do... but we took the opportunity to set up a new life. Things are much easier and simpler now, but we still have to work hard at protecting our priorities!" - Amy, Parent, Croton, NY

"If anyone — teachers, administrators, PTA board members — needs to be convinced of the urgency of this issue, they should watch ‘Race to Nowhere.’ Our kids are counting on us to tame the monster [this] has become." - Alice Dragoon, Parent, Lexington, MA

"I think that ‘Race to Nowhere’ is a great vehicle for change as it's a great place for... cultural attitude changes and it's a great way to inspire... lobbying for public policies. It's a movie that takes that direct work that micro work, the student experience, that one-on-one connection that really inspires change and brings it to the next level. I think that's what's so fantastic about ‘Race to Nowhere.’" - Christine C., Student, Northeastern University

"In February 2012, I screened ‘Race to Nowhere’ at the PayPal Town Hall to my colleagues and local community. What I enjoy most about ‘Race to Nowhere’ is that it isn't prescriptive; it merely provides a lens into the lives of children, who are on the receiving end of educational policy, and it unflinchingly shows the effects those policies have on our children and our families. There is a growing concern of what happens when these children move on to the workforce. We need employees that can define and solve problems; problems that do not have known nor correct answers. The ability to critically think is paramount as is the ability to gracefully fail and own mistakes. In other words, we need the complete

TESTIMONIALS & AUDIENCE RESPONSES, CONTINUED

opposite of what 12+ years of schooling provides. We should carefully consider the academic metrics by which we hold children accountable, because metrics drive behavior, and as this film shows, the behavior we want is not what we're getting. It's time to reexamine our goals as a community and ensure the education we want for our children is what they are getting. 'Race to Nowhere' is a great first step in this dialog." - Bil Corry, PayPal, Luxembourg

"The film provided the platform for a much needed dialogue around balance. School leaders have been given the opportunity and responsibility to restore balance to the lives of our students." - Joe Ianora, Principal, San Ramon, CA

"I'm a school superintendent that wants to fix our broken system and am the lone voice in the woods right now. I need to be a part of something bigger. I want in!" - Dave Tebo, Superintendent, Hamilton, MI

"Tonight's event was very special for us all at Google. I've never seen such emotion surface. Clearly, people were able to relate to the message. We all have those devastating stories, but they're usually locked up inside. As parents, we hurt to see our children paying the price for our collective misunderstandings. My first phone call, when I got home, was to my son in Arizona. I just wanted to hear his voice. He said, 'you can call me every night.'" - Ann F., Google, San Francisco

"There was something about watching 'Race to Nowhere' in our community that made people stop and think that we could change the experience for our children and make it better. A culture that supports student health and well-being can co-exist with a culture that supports student achievement and academic excellence. The two are not competing interests, but rather complementary interests. Well-rested, well-balanced students perform better academically and in every aspect of life." - Dr. Anne Robinson, Parent and Pediatrician, Ridgewood, NJ

"I would just like to thank you for your efforts. I'm a parent of two teenage girls, a pediatrician, and a medical educator with a master's degree in education and I have become increasingly distressed and disturbed by the culture of high school education. I've been fighting the homework battle at my daughters' school with only limited success. Thank you for all you have done." - Stuart Slavin, Pediatrician and Educator, St. Louis, MO

"I wanted to let you know, that if it were not for you and the film and knowing that there are things the parents can do, I would not have done anything or would have not known where to start! This is truly going to be life changing for so many and I will see it through thanks to you and your efforts!" - Myra, Parent, Placerville, CA

"The film is amazing and identifies one of the most problematic issues in math education - the pushing down of math content to earlier and earlier grades. Math has become a performance subject for so many students, and it is no longer about appreciation of ideas, mathematical beauty or application, it is about who can do it and who can not. It has been disastrous for students, of all grade levels. Math really is the worst offender among the school subjects when it comes to stress, which is extremely frustrating as we know that schools use approaches that are oppositional to those we know work from research on learning. We have the research on good teaching approaches in math, which happen to be non-stressful and result in higher achievement." - Jo Boaler, Professor of Mathematics Education at Stanford University

TESTIMONIALS & AUDIENCE RESPONSES, CONTINUED

"The Michigan Association of College Admissions Counseling (MACAC) was given an award this fall for our advocacy day and 'Race to Nowhere' program. Vicki's name was mentioned on stage!! What an honor." - Kim Bryant, University of Michigan Admissions Office, Michigan

"What happens to our children today affects all of us tomorrow. Our future demands better. Our children deserve better. Please join ASCD, the gifted artists responsible for 'Race to Nowhere', and all those who care about the education of children in dialogue about how to ensure each child, in each of our schools, in each community is healthy, safe, engaged, supported and challenged." - Gene Carter, Executive Director and CEO, ASCD

"This film challenges all members of the school community to begin having courageous conversations about how to best support student learning in the 21st century." - Kirby Hoy, San Ramon Valley Unified School District

RACE TO NOWHERE

CRITICAL PRESS

Slate

Race to Nowhere is a powerful, alarming documentary that's riling up parents across the country.

By Emily Yoffe, Slate.com

Updated Friday, April 29, 2011, at 12:28 PM ET

Battle Hymn of the Anti-Tiger Mother

The powerful, alarming documentary that's riling up parents across the country.

By the end of this school year, about half a million people will have watched the documentary *Race to Nowhere*. This stealth juggernaut can't be seen on TV, in any multiplex, or on DVD. But since the fall of last year, it's been shown almost 2,000 times in school auditoriums and community centers across the country—mostly to parents beset with the fear that they're blowing the raising of their kids. The emotional discussions following the screenings—part catharsis, part call to action, part finger-pointing—are excellent introductions to the contentious debate about what we want from our kids and from the people who educate them.

First-time filmmaker Vicki Abeles, 49, a Northern California lawyer and mother of three, was moved to pick up a camera when her children started suffering from school-related headaches, stomachaches, and panic attacks. What she produced is a wide-ranging polemic against our current education system that is artless, occasionally overwrought, and undeniably powerful. It confirms—and stokes—the unease many parents have about how miserable much of childhood seems today. It also sets up Abeles as the anti-Amy Chua. In *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, Chua's thesis is that if you let up, your kid will become a coddled American slacker. Abeles offers the antithesis. She argues that part of America's greatness is born of our misfits and dreamers, that our gift to our children is time to engage in "aimless" play.

Race to Nowhere is mainly composed of interviews with unhappy kids, concerned parents, and pressured teachers interspersed with commentary from experts in education and child development. In its 85 minutes, the documentary tackles so many issues that it sometimes feels as if it's cramming a semester's worth of material into one class. It's a canny strategy: Every parent will feel an identification and rush of stomach acid at something Abeles portrays—I know I did. The staggering amounts of homework kids receive and the perniciousness of standardized testing are two major themes.

But *Race to Nowhere* also introduces us to a culture of rampant cheating, which students see as the only way to keep up; rising numbers of medicated kids, some of whom abuse attention-deficit drugs to finish all their assignments; children nearing emotional and physical collapse over the expectation they must be dazzling; and young people trained to be so fearful of making mistakes or taking risks that they are unable to cope when arriving at the workplace. And then there is the agonizing story that bookends the movie—that of a 13-year-old girl, a perfect child so undone by her perceived failures in middle school that she committed suicide.

Abeles defends the broadness of her indictment. “You have to look at the unhealthy culture we’ve created. You have to name the problem,” she said in an interview.

The fact that the film can only be seen at group screenings is a strategy born of necessity—a distribution deal stalled out—that has proved opportune. Seeing the film is a communal experience, and that is the best way, Abeles said, to inspire change. The discussions are a first step toward action.

At a screening I went to, at a school in Montgomery County, Md.—which has one of the highest ranked school systems in the country—the parents who took to the microphone afterward could barely contain their outrage. One father, whose high school-age daughter was enrolled in the International Baccalaureate program, said she would need 10 hours a night to complete all the homework she was assigned. A first-grade mother said that because of academic pressure, her child’s class gets only a short daily recess and one physical-education class per week. Students who haven’t done their homework aren’t allowed outside during recess and are forced to wear a bathroom pass around their necks all day. “It’s like a scarlet letter!” she exclaimed. “It’s appalling!”

The educators sitting onstage were defensive and disheartened. One high-school teacher said the push for homework came from competitive parents—to snorts from the audience. An administrator said schools were under pressure from higher up the bureaucracy to enroll ever more students in Advanced Placement courses.

My daughter’s high school in Washington, D.C., showed the film recently at separate screenings for parents and students. Afterward, I talked to her and a group of her classmates, expecting they’d feel the film was a “J’accuse!” to the adults who were demanding so much from them.

But these freshmen were rather dismissive of the movie. Stress, pressure, hours of homework—that’s just the way life is, they collectively shrugged. But then they slowly started to describe things they’d had to give up to deal with their nightly homework load—a musical instrument or a beloved sport. They talked about seeing kids crying in the hall because they got a B on an exam. When an expert in the movie said kids need nine hours or more of sleep a night, they said the auditorium erupted in laughter. But *Race to Nowhere* may speak more directly to worried parents. “My mother loved the film,” one of my daughter’s friends said. “She’s gone in to talk to people at the school.”

Like that mother, I was educated in the ‘60s and ‘70s, an era notable for a desire to break down existing institutions. I had no homework through early elementary school, and when it started, it never became the nightly second shift that it is for my high-school student daughter. When I was her age, getting into a selective college was not a multi-year campaign that required paid consultants. We were not expected to have started our own charities or to have played at Carnegie Hall. When it came time to take the SAT, my preparation consisted of bringing enough sharpened pencils.

But education, like religion, is prone to wild swings of reform and counter-reform. By the 1980s, policymakers had grown alarmed at what they saw as a generation of uneducated nitwits, and in 1983 a presidential commission issued the landmark report *A Nation at Risk*, which stated that schools were failing to prepare students for the modern workforce and explicitly recommended more homework. And the levels have been ratcheting up ever since. The experts in *Race to Nowhere*

assert there's virtually no correlation between homework load and academic success in lower grades, and in upper grades, a reasonable amount is more effective than a ton.

The 2001 passage of the No Child Left Behind Act brought another wave of transformations. Its worthy premise was that an excellent education is the right of all children. The way it was decided to measure progress toward that goal is through standardized tests—with teachers' and administrators' careers on the line. But as the critics in *Race to Nowhere* argue, an unintended result of NCLB has been that what's being taught in class is increasingly narrowing to what's on those tests, and how best to take them, at the expense of creative thinking. Meanwhile, in 2009—the year *Race to Nowhere* made its film festival debut—Barack Obama announced *Race to the Top*, his administration's package of education reforms, which calls for still more high-stakes testing. (Abeles' title isn't mockery, just coincidence.)

Abeles' crusade against the enormous problems her film highlights is going to have a hard time gaining traction, warns education historian Diane Ravitch, author of *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, which indicts the punitive, reductive nature of our recent reforms. "Vicki's talking about a malignant force that's touching every school in America," Ravitch says.

In this year's State of the Union address, track coach Obama said we must "win the race to educate our kids," who are being lapped by little whizzes from China and elsewhere. But as Abeles notes—reformers of the reforms sometimes end up in the odd position of defending our apparent mediocrity—we've never led the world in test scores: "We've led the world in innovation."

At a recent Town Hall meeting, Obama seemed to express ambivalence about his own education program. "We have piled on a lot of standardized tests on our kids," he said, in response to a student who asked for fewer of them. "One thing I never want to see happen is schools that are just teaching to the test."

Abeles has become a full-time activist and is now working on a book. She knows change will only come in small steps. She cites a school principal who has put a lid on homework, a school district that's eliminated AP classes. She is showing the film to college presidents and admissions officers, hoping to get them to release some of the pressure. Maybe, she suggests, colleges can say that student résumés attached to applications (yes, teenagers have résumés—and often they're more impressive than yours) will go in the trash, or that they won't consider more than four AP courses.

And she says the change will also have to come household-by-household. My daughter recently suggested she should take AP history sophomore year because it would show colleges she was signing up for the most rigorous courses. I was happy to say, "I don't think you should."

The New York Times

Parents Embrace Documentary on Pressures of School

By TRIP GABRIEL

Published: December 8, 2010

It isn't often that a third of a movie audience sticks around to discuss its message, but that is the effect of "Race to Nowhere," a look at the downside of childhoods spent on résumé-building.

"How do you help your children balance when the whole education system is pushing, pushing, pushing, and you want your kids to be successful?" Alethea Lewis, a mother of two, asked a roomful of concerned parents who had just seen the film, a documentary, last week in Bronxville, N.Y., at a screening co-sponsored by the private Chapel School.

With no advertising and little news media attention, "Race to Nowhere" has become a must-see movie in communities where the kindergarten-to-Harvard steeplechase is most competitive.

More than 1,100 attended a screening last week at New Trier High School in Winnetka, Ill. About 500 saw it at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan in November. It has been shown to a roomful of fathers at Pixar during lunch hour and twice to employees at the Silicon Valley headquarters of Google.

All 325 seats in the auditorium of the New Canaan Country School in Connecticut were filled during a screening for parents last Thursday night. Francie Irvine, the assistant head of school, said, "Our parents' association president called me and said, 'My sister just saw this in California and we have to, have to, have to have it here.' "

The film portrays the pressures when schools pile on hours of homework, coaches turn sports into year-round obligations and parents pack their children off to music and computer camps during summer.

"Everyone expects us to be superheroes," one high school senior in the film says.

Another tells of borrowing her friends' prescription of Adderall to juggle her many commitments. "It's hard to be the vice president of your class, play on the soccer team and do homework," she says.

The movie introduces boys who drop out of high school from the pressure, girls who suffer stress-induced insomnia and worse, and students for whom "cheating has become another course," as one puts it.

"When success is defined by high grades, test scores, trophies," a child psychologist says in the film, "we know that we end up with unprepared, disengaged, exhausted and ultimately unhealthy kids."

Vicki Abeles, the middle-aged mother and first-time filmmaker who made "Race to Nowhere," picked up a camera when a doctor said that her then-12-year-old daughter's stomachaches were being caused by stress from school.

"I was determined to find out how we had gotten to a place where our family had so little time together," she explains in the film, which has an unslick, home-video quality, "where our kids were physically sick because of the pressures they were under."

In many ways, the movie is the alter ego to the better-known “Waiting for Superman,” another education documentary playing around the country this fall.

That film has earned \$6.3 million at the box office since its release and ranks 20th among the most successful documentaries ever, according to Box Office Mojo, in no small part because of a blast of publicity. The director appeared on “The Oprah Winfrey Show” and President Obama greeted its stars at the White House.

“Race to Nowhere” had a one-week run in two theaters, in New York and Los Angeles, but it has primarily been screened by community groups in school auditoriums, churches and temples. Local sponsors like Parent Teacher Associations sell tickets and split the take with the filmmakers.

Ms. Abeles, a corporate lawyer who briefly traded on the gold desk at Goldman Sachs before moving to northern California with her family, said the film cost her and other backers in the “mid-six figures.” It will have been shown at some 700 locations through February.

With her movie’s grass-roots success, Ms. Abeles has been approached by major distributors offering to place it in commercial theaters. But she is not convinced that the movie would reach as wide an audience or inspire viewers to stay for the discussions, which are moderated by principals, child psychologists and sometimes Ms. Abeles herself. The film’s Web site encourages viewers to follow up with local activism (and also links to research and studies supporting the film, which pretty much avoids citing any data).

“My passion is around the change this film has the potential to create,” Ms. Abeles said.

While “Waiting for Superman” lionizes urban reformers who embrace standardized testing as a necessary yardstick to hold schools and teachers accountable, Ms. Abeles believes that the testing movement is what has caused education to go off the tracks.

She talks to students, teachers and experts who say that teaching to tests, including the Advanced Placement tests, narrows education and diminishes creativity and independent thinking. Employers complain that college graduates these days lack initiative. An educator, Denise Pope, a lecturer at Stanford, says that the University of California requires remedial courses of half its students, even though their high school grades were stellar.

“They’re spitting back but not retaining the information,” Dr. Pope said.

Most of the families in “Race to Nowhere” are suburban and privileged, and the film has found its audience in those communities where parents often move for excellent schools. In addition to New Canaan and Winnetka, there were screenings last week in Los Altos, Calif., Bethesda, Md., and Chappaqua, N.Y. — towns where an Ivy League sticker on the back of a Range Rover is a given.

“You would not believe what reactions you get from other parents when you mention what colleges your children are looking at — you’re so judged,” Tara Vessels, a mother at the New Canaan Country School, told about 40 other parents and staff members who discussed the movie last Friday in the school cafeteria.

The Country School espouses a “whole child” philosophy, and its mission statement, inscribed on the cafeteria walls, includes the sentence: “We value the imagination and curiosity of children and respect childhood as an integral part of life.”

But parents said the larger community imposed its own values, and their children clamored to join an ice hockey league that practices until 10 p.m.

“Imagine if a sign out front of school says ‘Mistakes Are Made Here Often,’ ” mused one teacher, echoing a theme in the movie that schools should accept failure as part of learning. “No one would come here! But why not?”

A mother complained that her 13-year-old “had a chapter test, and that night had to study for a quiz” in the same class. “What is the point of all the testing?” she said. “It’s so stressful.”

“Great question,” Ms. Irvine, the assistant head of school, replied.

Tim Bazemore, the head of school, acknowledged ruefully that “the whole child in high school is a full résumé,” telling the parents that this represented “a failure of education leadership.”

Nonetheless, he wondered how parents would feel if teachers assigned less homework and did not penalize students who did not do it. Would families think the school was failing to prepare their children for high school and beyond?

The school “needs an honest dialogue with you,” Mr. Bazemore said.

The Washington Post

'Race to Nowhere' film highlights stress students face in high-pressure academics

By Donna St. George
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, October 7, 2010; 1:43 PM

It was as if their private worries had come to life on screen: Teenagers so pressured to get A's, to fill their college resumes with sports and music and language, they start losing their grip. Long nights of homework leave them exhausted. Stress becomes stomach pain and anorexia and depression. Some turn to cheating or pills. Others just give up.

Riveted to this disturbing tableau were 325 parents and educators, including Elise Browne Hughes, 46, who wiped away tears one recent evening in Bethesda while watching the documentary "Race to Nowhere," which is becoming a growing grass-roots phenomenon in the achievement-minded Washington area and beyond.

"It's in the culture, and it kind of feeds on itself," said Hughes, a mother of two sons who paid \$10 for a ticket and braved the heavy rain to watch the film at Walt Whitman High School.

For her and thousands of others nationwide, the film has raised difficult questions about how to raise well-adjusted children at a time when schools seem test-obsessed, advanced classes are the norm and parents worry that their sons and daughters will not go as far in life as they have.

One teacher in the film put it this way: "You have a fear from the parents that my kid needs to be able to get a job. Okay, I got them in the accelerated program; that's the first step. But now they need to perform and compete so they can get into a good school, and it's out of love. It's out of concern. It's out of fear. It's out of all these things that parents normally have, but it ends up turning kids into little professionals."

Nationally the film is playing as a quiet counterpoint to the better-known "[Waiting for 'Superman,'](#)" which focuses on failing urban schools. "Race to Nowhere" explores a different problem, the strains of competing in a pressure-packed academic culture that is highly test-driven and pushes some students to the edge.

The film is attracting notice from New York to California, where mom-turned-filmmaker, Vicki Abeles, a 48-year-old lawyer, launched the documentary project as she set out to understand the stresses her children, now ages 16, 14 and 11, were experiencing.

One daughter had become physically sick as she struggled with the demands of school. Then, several months into Abeles's effort, a teenager in her community committed suicide after getting a failing math grade, a tragedy Abeles says intensified her commitment to making the film.

"I think there is tremendous pressure on all kids to get the grade, to get the test score ... which is creating an epidemic of unhealthy kids who are also arriving at college and at the workplace unprepared," Abeles said in an interview.

Movie review: 'Race to Nowhere' September 09, 2010 | By Sheri Linden

Once upon a time kids got to hang out, play, do nothing in particular. Increasingly there's been an outcry against how structured — and future-focused — the lives of America's college-bound students have become. As "Race to Nowhere" demonstrates, the intense pressures they face, sometimes before they've reached the double-digit age bracket, continue to take their toll: rampant cheating, sleep deprivation, anorexia, depression, anxiety, self-mutilation, suicide.

Collecting the testimony of those who have been through the stress machine and those who have observed it firsthand, the documentary is a dire warning and solid piece of advocacy journalism, complete with an action checklist at film's end.

Filmmaker Vicki Abeles (who directs with Jessica Congdon) explores the culture of high achievement within her own family, her Bay Area community and around the country. Raised to believe in the necessity and value of hard work, she watched her children implode under the weight of extra-curricular demands and as many as six hours of nightly homework.

Interviews with students at both private and public schools, as well as parents, teachers, academicians and authors, uncover a market-driven conformity; one passionate teacher uses the word "roboticize" to describe the educational process. High school is preparation not for college — once through the gates, many Ivy League entrants need to take remedial courses — but for the all-important college application.

As films of this type must do, "Race to Nowhere" offers hope in the form of new models. For starters, there's the no-homework movement. Imagine. — Sheri Linden "Race to Nowhere." MPAA rating: PG-13. Running time: 1 hour, 25 minutes. At Laemmle's Sunset 5, West Hollywood.

Los Angeles Times

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Are Your Kids in a Race to Nowhere? By Lian Dolan

Oprah.com | June 09, 2010

That's where mom Vicki Abeles found herself a few years ago as she struggled to determine what was happening to her own daughter, who seemed to be slipping into a shell. Their family had a life that might seem familiar to you: a complicated, filled-to-the-minute schedule of school, sports and extracurricular activities. Hours spent on homework starting in elementary school and spiraling out of control by high school. Unrelenting standardized testing in school and encouragement to enroll in test prep classes outside of school. Pressure to get into and excel in multiple honors and AP classes. Constant struggles between parent and children in order to complete all assignments on time. Sleep-deprived kids thanks to late nights, early mornings and weekends swallowed up in schoolwork. Endless sports practices at dinnertime and games at church time. And the disappearance of family time in favor of tutors, private coaches and any other résumébuilding activities that you and your kids can squeeze into a week.



And all of this wrapped in the promise of getting into a top college someday.

Welcome to the culture of achievement, otherwise known as the "race to nowhere." Side effects include major health issues like depression, eating disorders, binge drinking, drug abuse, rampant cheating and other stress-related health issues. And it creates burnt-out kids who get to college in no shape to really do the high-level thinking and learning they need to be productive students and future employees.

Vicki's concerns lead her to question why she and her family were the unwitting participants in this march through childhood. Vicki is a mom who wanted who wanted to restore her daughter's health and well-being, not an expert in education. But the questions she asked of school officials, child psychologists, medical doctors, students, teachers and other parents inspired her to produce and co-direct a groundbreaking documentary called *Race to Nowhere*. The documentary is an investigation into the pressures American children and their teachers face in our achievement-obsessed education system and culture. The film is being screened in schools and communities all over the country. I had chance to watch the film and talk to the director last week. And, like a lot of parents in the standing-room-only audience at my screening, I saw my own family onscreen.

One of the hardest lessons to learn as a parent is to trust your instincts. You feel something is not right with your child, but you can't quite put your finger on it. Is she happy? Is she under too much



Are Your Kids in a Race to Nowhere? | continued

pressure? Is this the way it's supposed to be? These are all questions you might ask yourself when you see something's off. But, despite the voice in your head, there is a whole host of people, from school counselors to medical doctors to your closest friends, who will tell you: "Everything is just fine. Don't worry. This is normal behavior."

As the mother of a high schooler and a middle schooler, I'm right in the thick of the race to nowhere. Personally, I have tried to hold back the tide of pressure that can be heaped on kids in terms of grades, test scores, GPAs— all those measurables that we use to create a narrow definition of success for this generation. But, despite my efforts at balance and realistic expectations, it's easy to get swept up the race to succeed academically, especially if it seems like everybody else's child is a 4.0 student body president/team captain who recently started a nonprofit organization in his or her spare time.

Trusting your own instincts about how much your child can handle is a daily challenge in self-restraint. Sometimes, in order to maintain balance in your child's life and health, it can feel like you are one parent holding back the dam.

Not so, says Vicki. She has noticed a trend in many school districts after a screening of the film. "People are tired of being alone on these issues," she says. "They want community. They want to be together." Parents are forming online groups, meeting in person and committing to work toward change for the health of their students after coming together to screen the documentary. The film has empowered school districts to initiate change in areas like reducing or eliminating homework for elementary kids, setting later start times for tired high schoolers and limiting the number of AP courses a student can take in one semester. "Systemic change will happen when parents trust their instincts. And educators trust their instincts. It's too difficult to do by yourself," Vicki says.

Do you feel like your kids are in the race to nowhere? If you do, trust your instincts to do what's best for your own child. And visit the Race to Nowhere website to see if the film is screening in your area. You'll be inspired to make some changes, big and small, for the health of your kids.

Learn more about the documentary Race to Nowhere

Lian Dolan is a mother, wife, sister, friend, daughter, writer and talk show host. She writes and talks about her adventures in modern motherhood for her website, ChaosChronicles.com, and her weekly podcast, The Chaos Chronicles.

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THE HUFFINGTON POST

[Go See the Other Education Documentary: The Race to Nowhere](#)

Danny Miller | Posted: September 18, 2010 07:18 PM

The Internet Newspaper — at your doorstep. Follow HuffPost on Facebook and Twitter.

I've rarely seen a documentary get as much press before its release as Davis Guggenheim's "Waiting for Superman" has. I've seen the preview in movie theatres about a dozen times now and it always whips the audience into a frenzy, with some people shedding tears over these poor kids who simply want a decent education. But in some education circles, there is a growing rumbling that the well marketed film is not all it appears to be. Some worry that the documentary may help derail important school reform efforts. These folks are disappointed about what they deem to be an anti-teacher, anti-union, anti-progressive education stance on the part of the filmmakers. I'll wait to see the film myself before I comment but educator Rick Ayers has posted his response on the Huffington Post.

A lot of the hoopla surrounding this documentary is thanks to its famous director who shared an Oscar with Al Gore for their high profile "An Inconvenient Truth." I find myself sad that in all the hubbub about "Waiting for Superman," another documentary about the problems facing our schools is being largely ignored. That film, which I recently saw in its very brief L.A. run, is called "The Race to Nowhere."

This important documentary by Vicki Abeles shows the intense pressures that many adolescents face today with mountains of homework, a test-centered school culture, a full slate of extracurricular activities, and desperate expectations about getting into the "best" schools rather than the ones that are the best fit. Abeles started working on the documentary when her own children began to crack under the weight of the daily grind that included absolutely no time for unstructured play or the relatively carefree childhoods my generation enjoyed.

A bunch of teachers, students, and others are interviewed in the film to bring home the point that something has to be done about the non-child-centered focus that is hurting so many children throughout this country. One of the saddest interviews was with a clearly devoted, passionate teacher working with low-income kids in Oakland who finally felt forced to resign from her job after getting so much pressure to stop doing all of the stuff she did that worked with the kids in favor of the soul-killing practices that were geared towards higher test scores at the cost of creating lifelong learners or effective problem solvers. It's impossible not to be moved by the stories of some of these kids including the lovely, talented 15-year-old girl who committed suicide over a bad math grade.

This film is part of a broader movement to reject the craziness that is being mandated from above. The film's excellent website includes many resources and ideas for combating the system. One person interviewed is spearheading the "no homework" movement and makes a strong case for eliminating homework. Thank God my high school daughter's homework isn't as insane as the six plus hours that many of the kids in the film have to do each night, but I'm very interested in the move to abolish homework completely. And by the way, when several AP teachers in the film cut their homework load in half, do you know what happened? Their students' test scores went way UP.

Go see this film...and help stop the insanity!

Follow Danny Miller on Twitter: www.twitter.com/jeweatyet

Under pressure: Lafayette filmmaker documents problems with teen 'achievement culture'

Thursday, November 11, 2010 | by amanda pazornik

Natalie wanted to succeed.

In junior high, the Oakland native trudged through hours of homework, while juggling soccer practice, tennis lessons and Hebrew school three times a week.

By the time she got to high school, the pressure to get straight A's pushed her to stop eating. Instead, she fueled her body with caffeine or ADD drugs just to stay awake.

"I figured out that not eating would give me more energy," Natalie says in the documentary "Race to Nowhere."

"I could stay up later from the insomnia and could get so much done at night. But it still wasn't enough time."

Natalie's ordeal is just one example of the problems with the high-pressure, standardized-test-centric "achievement culture" infiltrating schools nationwide, according to "Race to Nowhere" filmmaker Vicki Abeles of Lafayette.



Darrick Smith teaches in his classroom at his former school, Oakland Tech, in "Race to Nowhere." photos/courtesy of reel link films

Abeles, an attorney and Jewish mother of three, was compelled to make the documentary when she saw what her own children were up against in the classroom and after the last bell rang at school.

"I didn't think when I had kids that I would only see them for 20 minutes at dinner," Abeles, a member of Lafayette's Temple Isaiah, says in the film. "I started to see the toll the schedule and stress was taking on them ... and I wanted to understand what was going on."

The result is "Race to Nowhere," a documentary about the stresses faced by American students and their educators in

a system and culture obsessed with the achievement, competition and pressure to perform.

It turns a spotlight on clusters of students — many in the Bay Area — who have been pushed to the academic brink; on teachers who are burned out and worried students aren't developing the skills they need in test-focused environments; and on parents who are trying to do what's best for their kids, though often to their detriment.

"I wanted to do something that would give students a voice," Abeles said during a phone interview. "I also wanted to capture the power of the media in a positive way. This was an investigation. I didn't know what the story would be, but it turned into a powerful way to raise awareness to create the political will needed for change."

Under Pressure | continued

"Race to Nowhere" is now being screened around the Bay Area at Jewish community centers, houses of worship, independent movie theaters and schools. Its narrative is a call to mobilize families, educators and policymakers to help disprove the notion that the educational system is "one-size-fits-all."

The film is dedicated to Devon Marvin, a 13-year-old girl who committed suicide in 2008 after receiving a bad grade on a math test. The Bay Area teen always got straight A's, her mother, Jane Marvin, says in the film. Devon saw B's as failure.

"There were no signs," a tearful Marvin says. "That's what made it, and continues to make it, so scary. How could I let this happen? The only thing I could think of was this internal pressure."

When Abeles, who produced and co-directed the film with editor Jessica Congdon, set out to make the film, her family was not going to be part of it. About a year into production, however, she was encouraged to add her own kids' struggles to the mix.

Viewers are first introduced to the Abeles' daughter Jamey, then in seventh grade, and son Zak, then in third. With every additional hour of homework tacked on to their already heavy workload, the kids' health suffers.

They complain of headaches, stomachaches and anxiety. Jamey, who deals with bouts of depression during this time, wakes up in the middle of the night doubled over in pain. Vicki and her husband, Doug, rush her to the hospital emergency room, where doctors diagnose her ailments as stress-related.

This all occurs just after Jamey's bat mitzvah. She sought guidance in the form of walks and trips to the frozen yogurt shop with Temple Isaiah clergy, Abeles said.

Of the hundreds of young subjects interviewed for the film, nearly all were impacted by the "achievement culture" that college-bound students are thrust into at an early age.

There's Kelly, a senior at Monte Vista High School in Danville, who sees societal pressures to be "smart, pretty, athletic and artistic" as obstacles to finding one's true identity. "You have to know yourself," she says. "Because if you don't, you will lose yourself."

One high school student refers to high school as "preparation for the college application, not college." A "race to nowhere" is how another describes the rush to achieve.

And then there are parents, many of whom push for better test scores and grades so their kids can compete for spots at top universities — not necessarily ones that match their child's needs and learning abilities.

One mom in the film says she feels like a "prison guard."

Naima Jahi-Coleman, an undergraduate admissions specialist at U.C. Berkeley, explains in the film that college is "big business" — the more applicants there are, the more it increases a school's reputation.

And universities are looking for the best.

Under Pressure | continued

"I have been a perpetrator of this madness in a sense because I've gone out and told kids, 'You have to take this AP class or this honors class, and take as many as you can,' " Jahi-Coleman says. "We want to see if you've taken total advantage of the opportunities at your high school.

"I don't think we realize the pressure and stress that are on these kids to perform. We just know the ultimate goal and what we want. We want the top students because we are a top institution. But I wonder sometimes at the expense of what?"

Renee MacDonald, 15, is a sophomore at Jewish Community High School of the Bay — but you wouldn't know that by looking at her schedule.

In ninth grade, MacDonald took physics and loved it. She discovered that she could enroll in AP physics only if she was simultaneously signed up for AP calculus. To solve the problem, MacDonald took an online version of Algebra II — the designated math course for sophomores — last summer and is currently taking honors pre-calculus. Next year's schedule will include AP physics and AP calculus, courses normally reserved for seniors.

"I got super stressed out over the summer because I was taking a whole year's worth of math online without a teacher," MacDonald said. "I also got my [learner's] permit and took a road trip. Everybody in my family told me to slow down, but once I start things, I don't like to stop."

Instead, MacDonald sought creative therapy in an eight-week comedic monologue writing class. It was there that she created a one-woman show, "Who Wants to be a Cal Student?" satirizing the rigorous requirements to get into her dream school, U.C. Berkeley.

"Those rants and exaggerations were based on personal struggles," said MacDonald, who loves to act. "What am I doing? Is this really worth it? Why is the college admissions system the way it is? You have to be a super person to get in."

In the Abeles household, conversations about school no longer focus on performance. They encourage the kids to have balance, and not take on too much academically or over-schedule extra-curricular activities. They urge their kids to go to bed, even if their homework isn't finished.

"We should all feel empowered to say we need more balance," Abeles said. "My kids have become advocates for themselves, but it's unfortunate that so many young people can't see past the end of the day or realize things are going to get better. These should be the best years of their lives."

The Boston Globe

Film focuses on stressed-out students

James Sullivan, Globe Correspondent | January 24, 2011

HARVARD — Molly O'Rourke-Friel is a senior at the prestigious Bromfield School, a public school for grades 6-12 that is known for high academic standards. A member of the drama club and student representative to the town's School Committee, she considers herself a healthy, well-balanced young woman.

But she often finds herself worrying alongside her peers, many of whom stay up late doing homework and studying for their school's many tests. With expectations that they'll be accepted into elite universities, she said, they feel pressured to compete at the highest level.

"The culture of anxiety is contagious," O'Rourke-Friel told a crowd gathered in the school's auditorium Thursday evening for a special screening of "Race to Nowhere," a provocative new documentary that explores the side effects of a hypercompetitive school environment and the rise of testing standards across the country.

"Race to Nowhere," which features interviews with students, parents, teachers, and administrators from Connecticut to California, argues that the high-stakes push to achieve has created a generation of high-strung students constrained in a "one-size-fits-all" system. It was produced and co-directed by a California mother of three who began the project when her own children developed symptoms of depression over their schooling.

At screenings like the one in Harvard and in dozens of other US cities and towns, the film has sparked deep discussions about the state of American education. In Massachusetts, home to some of the country's top colleges and universities, the film has drawn especially eager audiences in such affluent towns as Concord and Weston, where upcoming screenings are already sold out. Showings in Cambridge, Newton, Hingham, and other local communities are scheduled in the coming weeks.

"Your presence says so much about how much education is valued in this community," Bromfield's principal, Jim O'Shea, said in brief remarks before the screening. Some in the audience of several hundred asked whether those values sometimes come at the expense of students' well-being.

During a question-and-answer session after the film, Jim Ware, a father of twin girls at Bromfield, drew applause when he asked O'Shea and Superintendent Thomas Jefferson whether they would consider scaling back on the amount of homework the school's teachers assign. In particular, he was dismayed that his daughters were required to do homework over a school vacation.

Sidney Cannon, whose four children attended a progressive Waldorf school before moving into the Harvard district a few years ago, said she has found the transition difficult.

"They're not teaching the students how to learn," she said, as her son, Lindsay, a junior at Bromfield, stood by her side. "They're just cramming them with facts."

Unlike many of her fellow parents, who push their children to apply to the country's top colleges, Cannon said she does not insist that her children participate in after-school sports and other extracurricular activities. "They do have a lot of down time," she said.

The Boston Globe

Film focuses on stressed-out students | continued

Still, she admitted she sometimes gets caught up in the expectations: "I'm very concerned about my children's grades, and I talk to them about having to play the game." Like many of the families in the film, hers has dealt with diagnoses of clinical depression and attention-deficit disorder.

In the film, a guidance counselor bemoans parents' use of flashcards for their toddlers "when they're supposed to be sucking on their toes and thumbs." Another claims that the current generation of students has not been given enough opportunity to explore "the fundamental question of adolescence: Who am I?"

"These are human beings, not cars on an assembly line," producer Vicki Abeles said by phone from her home in the San Francisco Bay area. "Do we want a generation of good test-takers, or people who can actually think and solve problems?"

"I don't want to put it all on the education system," she said. "Schools are just a microcosm of the larger culture. We need to think about changing our mind set, and this film has the power to do that."

Abeles, who will be on hand at Amherst Regional High School to present the film on Feb. 2, said she has heard from several distributors interested in picking up the film for wide release. But she prefers the grass-roots nature of the screening series, at least for now, because that provides a forum for dialogue that theatrical showings might not.

In Harvard, one mother stepped to the microphone and explained how she had raised her children to decide for themselves whether they wanted to do their elementary school homework. Ilene Rodman, a guidance counselor in the Chelmsford school system, implored audience members to let their children see them make mistakes.

"Youths should see that the world doesn't have to be a perfect place," she said.

Dr. Madhavi Kamireddi, a child psychiatrist who was one of two panelists from the medical profession taking part, said parents must find a balance between encouraging children's academic progress and their creative outlets.

The solution, she said, is not just to take away their challenges.

"I don't think any of you would have accomplished anything if nobody worked hard," she said. Jefferson, the superintendent, suggested that the film draws a "false argument" between preparing students to perform well on tests and giving them room to create. "We can do both," he said.

Though he does not approve of the federal No Child Left Behind law, which sets achievement benchmarks tied to scores on standardized tests such as the MCAS, Jefferson acknowledged that his schools do emphasize test results.

"We do well," he said, "and we're not going to apologize for that."

In the lobby, James Porter, who graduated from Bromfield in 1984, recalled how he was dropped from the school's math team after failing art and gym classes, where he didn't "fit the ideal."

"That's stayed with me my whole life," he said.

The documentary screening, he said, was a step in the right direction. "I'm glad the school put this out there, so we can start this talk."

For a list of screenings, go to www.racetonowhere.com.

RACE TO NOWHERE

ARTICLES WRITTEN BY VICKI ABELES



'Good Mother vs. Tiger Mother: A Response to Caitlin Flanagan

By Vicki Abeles

A filmmaker cited in a recent Atlantic column takes issue with the author's message

Caitlin Flanagan, like so many people writing about Amy Chua's new book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, not only seems to perpetuate the myth that entrance into the Ivy League is the singular key to a good job and a good life, but also posits in *The Atlantic* that such admission would be imminently more achievable if American mothers were less obsequious in encouraging their children's passions and more Chua-esque in facing the hard reality that children "can't have a fun, low-stress childhood and also an Ivy League education."

Flanagan claims that the "good mothers"--those more concerned with their children's health, happiness, and well-being than the Machiavellian Chua wannabes--"love ... to organize viewings of a documentary called *Race to Nowhere*," a film that I produced and co-directed. *Race to Nowhere* explores the flaws of America's lopsided, numbers-driven education system and highlights the physical, emotional, and mental toll our culture's misplaced value system is taking on our children.

While the film acknowledges that this is a complex issue for which there are no simple solutions, the majority of pediatricians, clinicians, psychologists, and authors I interviewed generally agreed that such measures as those Flanagan dismisses in her piece--limiting the number of Advanced Placement courses a child takes, prioritizing extracurriculars, protecting sleep--and generally providing a child with the developmentally appropriate latitude to be a child could, in fact, help to counter the widespread depression, anxiety, self-mutilation, and suicidal tendencies that mental-health professionals are increasingly treating in middle- and high-school students. Flanagan, in contrast, apparently sees these tactics as lowering the bar, collectively calling them "the Rutgers Solution" (which one can only deduce to mean a willingness to settle for presumed mediocrity in exchange for fewer ulcers).

To this, I respectfully offer "the Rutgers response," not as a means of defending this particular institution, as I have no affiliation with or investment in it (though I am, as noted below, newly impressed by some of its merits), but as a symbol for the thousands of competitive American colleges

and universities that Flanagan apparently discounts simply because they are not ranked among the elite eight.

For 13 consecutive years, Rutgers has been ranked No. 1 in the nation for diversity by the same publication that ranks the Ivies (*U.S. News & World Report: America's Best Colleges*). One might surmise that spending four years learning to peacefully coexist and productively collaborate with other students from different backgrounds--socioeconomic, ethnic, geographic, religious--might prepare a young college graduate with the life skills to succeed in the global economy. And in January 2009, *SmartMoney* magazine ranked Rutgers No. 6 in the nation for the value it delivered to its graduates (based on college costs versus median salaries three years and 15 years after graduation). For those families not in the top income quartile--which is, according to former Harvard President Lawrence Summers, where a whopping 74 percent of the undergraduates that populate America's most prestigious colleges comfortably reside--Rutgers offers a pretty good deal.

But the point isn't really that Rutgers is a good, solid school, a perfectly respectable choice in the pantheon of four-year colleges and, if not covered in ivy, competitive by many standards (it doesn't, in fact, as a colleague of Flanagan's recently asserted, take "most applicants"; it offers admission to 59 percent of applications received, and it requires a median SAT score of 591 and 612 in verbal and math, respectively). The point is that writers like Flanagan are complicit in perpetuating an insidious "winner-take-all" mentality, convincing the whole of our students that Yale and its ilk are the Holy Grail. After they've been rejected--and even Flanagan admits that the majority will be rejected--they will not only be gravely disappointed, they may also be stressed to the point of serious illness, be it physical or mental; dependent on caffeine or even Adderall (to keep up) and tranquilizers (to come down); and potentially convinced that they are "failures for life" because, as more than one student told me during the making of the film, they think, "If I don't get into the school of my dreams ... I'm like ... totally screwed."

If Harvard receives 35,000 applications for a mere 1,640 freshman spaces, something is clearly amiss in our value system. Michael Thompson, a psychologist and author, wrote in the April issue of *Educational Leadership*, "What makes students and families crazy during ... the college admissions process is their belief that college admissions is about finding the right college. It isn't. [Students should] search for the best fit."

I believe one of the most important messages in *Race to Nowhere* is the need for us, as a culture, to redefine success. No standardized test measures for aptitude in the arts; an emphasis on rote memorization has replaced the value of developmentally appropriate, purposeful learning. Educators are just as stressed as students in the rush to survey as many topics in the curriculum as possible, as they are often forced to "teach to the test." Childhood has been replaced with résumé-building, and the joie de vivre that has historically inspired imagination (and, not coincidentally, has fueled the long-standing American-dominated excellence in innovation) has been replaced with Tiger Mom-approved tutors and coaches and lessons. By and large, we are raising a generation of joyless little professionals who, even if they gain entrance to the hallowed halls of those same eight schools, might well lack creative, independent thinking skills and crumble when criticized, and, six years after graduating high school, may still not have a college degree.

As a culture, we have to ask ourselves: What really matters, in the name of educating our children and in ensuring our place in the global economy? To quote Michael Thompson again from that same article, "No college--not Harvard, Stanford ... or any institution whose name we might insert--can answer [the] question ... 'will this teenager grow up to be an independent, productive, moral, and loving young adult?'"

Flanagan and I may agree on one point. In concluding her article, she writes, "Life is a series of choices, each with its own rewards and consequences . . . At best--at the very best--it can only offer us choices between two good things, and as we grasp at one, we lose the other forever." If the choice is between (A) pushing my children--physically, emotionally, and mentally--to the extremes of unhealthy limits so they can try to grasp that elusive Ivy-coated brass ring, or (B) encouraging their passions, instilling good values, protecting their health, and focusing on the "right fit" college for their personality, learning style, and interests, then this "good mother" has already made her choice. I choose B. So, too, do the 500,000-plus good mothers, fathers, teachers, principals, students, and others who have seen, discussed, and continue to support the message behind *Race to Nowhere*.

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“Crossing the Line: How the Academic Rat Race Is Making Our Kids Sick” — Huffington Post | May 19, 2014 | Last winter, I watched my daughter, a high school senior, survive an anxiety-ridden few weeks leading up to final exams, beset with the flu, little sleep and constant studying. With that done, she switched to incessantly monitoring her grades online, fearing that her hopes of becoming a veterinarian ride on these numbers. And I had to ask: Is this what childhood has come to?

“Outlook’s Sixth-Annual Spring Cleaning: AP Tests” — The Washington Post | May 1, 2014 | To hear the College Board tell it, Advanced Placement classes can do it all: Prepare teens to succeed in college! Expose poor and minority students to more rigorous material! Reduce the cost of college by allowing students to graduate earlier! The educational and emotional toll these classes take would be too high even if the AP program delivered on all its promises. But it doesn’t.

“How We Teach Kids to Cheat on Tests” — The Washington Post | February 2, 2014 | We don’t ponder whether the roots of cheating are in the very fabric of our competitive culture - a culture in which status points such as a prestigious alma mater, a six-figure salary and a desirable zip code in which to raise one’s family are seen as the markers of American success.

“Why Christie’s Fix is Misguided” — The Washington Post | January 29, 2014 | I’ve found no compelling research that supports the proposition that a longer school day improves educational outcomes. Students who are more engaged, curious, involved and passionate about what’s happening in their classrooms learn more.

“When Homework Does More Harm than Good” — Huffington Post | October 10, 2013 | At screenings of “Race to Nowhere” in communities across the country, few issues have stirred audience discussion as much as the debate over students’ increasingly heavy homework loads.

“A New Education Story” — Huffington Post | March 25, 2013 | The realization that we need a new narrative around education is where our work as filmmakers and advocates began six years ago. Race to Nowhere gives voice to those closest to the education system and highlights how a narrow focus on high-stakes testing, competition and busyness has led to an epidemic of anxious, disengaged and unprepared young people.

“After Newtown: Taking Time to Connect” — Huffington Post | December 26, 2012 | ... reflection is more important than ever — this year and every year. We need, as a nation and as individual families, to give ourselves time to contemplate this tragedy and to empathize with the suffering of our fellow parents in Newtown. Doing so might give us a deeper awareness and greater impetus to wade through our usual holiday stress and busyness to embrace what can be the best part of the season: time with loved ones.

“Once Upon a Time” — Huffington Post | December 11, 2012 | One would be hard-pressed to find a parent who doesn’t, at times, doubt the decisions they make for their children. Pampers or Huggies? Soccer or baseball? Dance classes or art? As children grow, such decisions aren’t limited to “this” or “that”; rather, it becomes SAT Prep classes and AP classes. Tutoring and ballet. The more-is-better, bigger-is-better mentality begins to inform every decision, leaving students with full schedules and sleep deprivation in the name of “achievement” and “results.”

“The Blame Game” — The Washington Post/Valerie Strauss | October 8th, 2012 | By Vicki Abeles & Wendy Grolnick, author of “Pressured Parents; Stressed-Out Kids.” Hollywood isn’t typically lauded for its subtlety. But as parents, educators and advocates for better schools for America’s students, we can hope for a truth-based, reasoned, blameless national conversation about education.

More articles written by Vicki Abeles | [continued](#)

"The Supplies Kids Really Need for School" — The Washington Post | September 4th, 2012 | By Vicki Abeles and Dr. Madeline Levine, author of the book "Teach your children well."

"The Rat Race of Childhood: Why We Need to Balance Students' Lives" — Huffington Post | July 20, 2012 | By Vicki Abeles | Abeles reflects on 2012's Aspen Ideas Festival, Anne-Marie Slaughter and why "the question of how and why our education system encourages our children to 'have it all' remains largely unexplored."

"Assigning Homework with One Voice" — Huffington Post | June 4, 2012 | Why the National PTA Should Adopt National Homework Guidelines.

"Is This What Education Is Really About?" — The Washington Post | May 2012 | By Vicki Abeles and Jo Boaler, Stanford University | Welcome to standardized testing season, when students nationwide are clearing their desks, sharpening their pencils and fighting feelings of anxiety to meet our schools', states', and federal government's desire for a simple, quantifiable way to measure them. Is this really what education is about?

"Why We're Getting the Homework Question Wrong" — The Washington Post | May 2012 | Are American students... spending too much of their lives at their desks? And is putting in that grueling second shift of homework paying off in the long-term?

"Walking Zombies" — The Washington Post | March 2012 | By Vicki Abeles and Dr. Abigail Baird, Vassar College | This coming week most of us will lose an hour of sleep as we set our clocks ahead for Daylight Savings Time. But imagine if you lost an hour of sleep — or even more — every night of your life. That's what it's like for our nation's teens, who are facing an epidemic of sleep deprivation.