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Crippling Competition, Part 1

by Scott McPherson

Independence is the only gauge of human virtue and value. What a man is and makes of himself; not what he has or hasn't done for others. There is no substitute for personal dignity. There is no standard of personal dignity except independence.

— Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead*

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Just about anyone who values excellence, innovation, low prices, and variety in their consumption understands the important role played by competition in realizing each of these qualities. The ideal of the marketplace is associated with the promise of competition: a wide assortment of goods and services accessible to the largest possible segment of society.

Such is our love of competition that we even *mandate* it, however misguidedly, by means of antitrust legislation. We love a good horse race.

And competition is not just reserved for the arena of supply and demand. In our schools, millions of students are competing daily, hour by hour, with their peers, in alleged “preparation” for the real world; once out of school, persons will have to compete with one another for jobs, promotions, and the biggest paycheck. A good start is working hard for good grades, a high-school diploma, a high SAT score, and, if you're lucky, a scholarship. Might as well get used to it, the wise intone.

The government school system is not unlike an episode of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*

Whoever correctly answers the predetermined — and arbitrarily chosen — questions in the order submitted and through the simplest possible mode of delivery (for the administrators, anyway) will advance to the next round (or grade level).

Think of it. Throughout the school year, students are every day quizzed, tested, pushed, prodded, cajoled, and finally coerced into acting out a script written by someone else — or else — to succeed, succeed, *succeed!* At what? Well the game, of course.

The children worthy of proceeding up the ladder are those who perform (we actually use that word — “perform”) best in an assortment of *pre-chosen* subjects (nobody asks *them* what they

want to learn) taught using a cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all approach hinging primarily on rote memorization. The results are measured by their “scores” on weekly quizzes, piles of homework (often beginning now as early as elementary school), prescribed “projects” (completed either alone or in a group — the decision is up the teacher), and ultimately, the high-stakes test administered at the end of every semester or school year.

In this intellectual coliseum, we adorn the winners with adoration, special privileges (the “good” student is easily forgiven for bad behavior), and elite-sounding tests and curricula, labeled as much for their psychological impact (on the winners as well as the losers) as for their “superior” content, such as “advanced placement.”

The losers, on the other hand, whether on TV or in the classroom, are consigned to the role of failures. In school, we reserve for them distinctive labels as well, such as “special education” or “learning disabled,” which even come with the further insult of an easy acronym (“LD”) or a condescending grouping (“special-needs kids”), which drives home even more surely to these students their wrong number in life’s cruel lottery. At best, they’ll just be considered “average” kids.

All kids get an “equal” chance at succeeding, we’re told. Every state constitution but one in this country promises something like “a quality education for all.” The No Child Left Behind law will guarantee it, if you believe the president. They’re all given the same kinds of curricula, classes, teachers, textbooks, projects, quizzes, tests, lectures, and atmosphere. In the end, they’ll all receive their “just” reward: A, B, C, D, or F.

For those who thrive in this kind of environment — whether a minority, significant minority, or even a majority of students, it doesn’t really matter — everything is great. They play the school game — so much like life’s game, they’re constantly told — and are commensurately rewarded with an A+ or a B+ on their “report card” which virtually guarantees (they’re told) a series of open doors forever after.

To drive home the point, this record is permanent: it will follow them throughout their schooling years and be used at the end to determine their overall “value” as a student — and as a human, worker, or citizen. Life’s rich pageant awaits.

For most people, grades are viewed as a kind of medium of exchange: they determine who gets the largest chunk of the pie. Those who succeed get rich (a good GPA) and go on to run the world.

And rightly so, many would add. The losers, like the fabled grasshopper who plays all summer and then starves in winter, are believed to reap what they’ve sown. “Buckle down” is the best they can hope for by way of assistance (Ritalin possibly being the worst).

Endurance then, more than any other characteristic, is the recipe for surviving in this environment. Endure conformity, endure pressure and anxiety, endure banality, endure the rote,

endure routine, but above all endure the loss of *self*-motivated thought and action. Endure the commands of others.

Public schools in the real world

The trouble with this approach is that school — at least in the compulsory form it popularly takes — is nothing at all like the real world, and it is nothing at all like the marketplace, making a system of competition between students for pre-arranged prizes using pre-determined means not only absurd and misguided, but cruel and possibly even damaging.

The school system does not prepare kids for the real world: it chooses winners and losers, and not according to any objective criteria, but according to a shifting and subjective standard that is devised for the system's (and parents') ease and contentment. The alternative is much closer to reality, though much more difficult to administer, which probably explains why so few desire it.

Far from being a reflection of market competition, schools are more like a microcosm of Soviet-style society. Kids are grouped according to their class (rich, middle class, or poor; black, white, or Hispanic), ability (see above), age, or geography (see class). They are sorted, placed in a local "workplace" (the school), given a bureaucratically determined set of instructions (teachers, curriculum, subjects), and watched like laboratory mice to see whether they are up to the task of being good workers, citizens, humans.

The mild, timid, and malleable work silently through the system. The natural leaders are given reign over the others. The nonconformists are punished, broken down, and even exiled (behavior-modifying drugs, "special-ed" classes, demerits, detention, or suspension).

Among the "good" students — those who test well, sit still, and behave themselves — the leaders are like members of the Party: they get the nice bureaucratic jobs ("teacher's assistant," "hall monitor," et cetera), or maybe even a position in the Politburo (student government). The mild, timid, and malleable are the worker bees: the average student who simply does his time, wasting away years of his life doing other people's bidding to stay out of trouble and get by; the kind of people who made up the bulk of the "noble" proletariat in Marx's socialist nightmare — factory workers, collective farmers, soldiers, schoolteachers — and who can be found staffing "cubicle farms" in today's corporate state.

The "bad" students — the ones who fail their tests, reject rote learning, bristle with energy for the wider world, dislike the subject matter, or learn through doing rather than study — are negatively labeled, segregated, drugged, shamed, and silenced. Their inability — through ignorance, lack of desire, or whatever — to please the administration means a 12-year sentence of misery, fear, confusion, shame, insecurity, and, ultimately, a feeling that the wider world is not for them after all, not theirs for the taking. *That* is for the "good" students — everyone tells them so.

No student, like the Soviet citizen, is *ever* asked what he would like to do with his time. He's *told*. The mighty state has already decided what he should be doing before he was even *born*.

It's easy to see how this kind of system is simple and comfortable to administer from the point of view of a school board, city council, state legislature, and the federal cabinet. If the student can't succeed in this role, there must be something wrong — with *him*. Above the entrance to every school in the nation should be a sign reading, "The abolition of bourgeois individuality, bourgeois independence, and bourgeois freedom is undoubtedly aimed at." This is not mere hyperbole. Albert Shanker, former head of the American Federation of Teachers, admitted openly that "public education operates like a planned economy, a bureaucratic system in which everybody's role is spelled out in advance.... It's no surprise that our school system doesn't improve; it more resembles the communist economy than our own market economy."

This is the world of the government schoolhouse, but not the world of an open society based on genuine competition and free enterprise.

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