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**Want Students Who Think for Themselves? Let’s Eliminate Our Standardized School System**

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“Mr. Morita, you were wrong. School is not the problem. Students are the problem.” This statement was shared by a former middle school student of mine during his freshman year of high school. John\* was getting all A’s and one B in stark contrast to the B’s, C’s, and D’s received in middle school. He seemed to think that if students would just study and be compliant then they would do well.

Although we were on a video call, I noticed an exhausted and drained look on his face and he mentioned he often spent 3-4 hours a day studying to complete tedious, irrelevant and lengthy assignments. Surprisingly, John said he felt “smart” now because of his good grades. He suggested that instead of changing traditional school systems, guidelines and practices, I should be working toward helping students learn how to be successful within the current school environment. John ended with the recommendation that I provide assignments and tests focused on rote learning and memorization.

When he first entered middle school, John was used to a more traditional learning environment. He wanted everything to be simple, and would often say things like, “Tell me what I have to do and when it’s due.” John preferred reading passages and answering questions where all of his classmate’s answers would be similar because he could get the work done quickly. But my school doesn’t work that way. Instead, we take a more personalized approach that provides choices for what and how students learn to support their growth. In this kind of learning environment, where a student’s creativity and critical thinking skills are constantly challenged, John took some time to adjust. But over the course of three years’ mentoring, John was eventually able to do quite well in my music class as an eighth grader.

Grading is a complex issue that I believe does not always accurately reflect a learner’s ability. It definitely does not represent their potential as a learner when the experiences follow a uniform path that limits a student’s individuality. The primary purpose of grading is to communicate a student’s achievement of learning goals. I don’t believe this is what’s best for kids. Instead, we must ensure that learners are intrinsically motivated through learning activities that are challenging, purposeful, relevant and empowering.

As a music and percussion teacher, I often have students compose their own music pieces for the instruments they want to learn. The music students compose becomes something they can dedicate to a loved one or perform at a concert. This is what motivates my students—not the letter grade they’ll get at the end of the year. Grades should not be the driving motivator for students to learn. Striving to finish an assignment quickly is not a reliable indicator of a valuable learning experience.

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After three years of intense guidance throughout middle school, John's entire outlook about education shifted in just 8 weeks of high school. I was utterly taken aback and realized that I must renew my commitment to advocating so that every educator can reimagine education to meet the needs of each individual learner. We must re-evaluate what parts of our education system to keep and what to update. Too many students either give up on school or fall in line with believing that they need to conform to a one-size-fits-all approach. I believe in a system with less standardized learning and more emphasis on flexible deadlines, peer collaboration and teaching, smaller learning communities, and sharing learning through authentic public showcases. The goal is always to empower learners to build confidence within themselves.

The spark for writing this article came after reading “Evolving Education” by Dr. Katie Martin, a well-respected education author, speaker, workshop facilitator, and former Hawaii Department of Education public school educator. In the book, Martin shares how to move from school-centered education—i.e., “learners adapt to the standardized system”—to a learner-centered education where “the system adapts to meet the needs of the learner.” I immediately remembered what John said about how he learned how to adapt to school because of the good grades he was now receiving.

The way forward is to create systems and cultures to celebrate our learners' strengths while supporting their individual needs. Every child deserves to feel confident like my former student did in middle school without conforming to a standardized system. Suppose you are looking for a community that keeps learners at the heart of education. In that case, I recommend delving into books by Katie Martin, Jan Iwase, George Couros, Eric Sheninger, or Ted Dintersmith to learn about practical and relevant ways to make the necessary shifts in our daily practices alongside our young learners.

It is a wake-up call when a student feels defeated by an educational system that focuses on standardizing students who feel like they are “the problem.” We can’t expect students to understand the purpose of education on their own. They need educators, leaders and supporters to guide them to create the education system they deserve to succeed in life. I stand by what I share with all of my students: that we must reimagine and redesign our education system so that students are NOT the problem.

One year later, I asked John if he still believed that students should conform to school. His response surprised and saddened me again, “To succeed in high school, yes, but to succeed in life, no.”

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*\*Student name was changed for this story.*