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Professor Vogel
Wicked Problems
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The Problem With The School System

Is there anybody who did not hate some aspect of school as a child? When one thinks of their school years, boredom and stress are the primary things brought to mind. A bunch of long days, filled with grey hallways and endless piles of work that seem meaningless. To me, the thing that sticks out the most is receiving assignments back with a large, red F scrawled on the front.

The school system in America is fundamentally broken. It targets children who are at a disadvantage in any way, such as those physically or socioeconomically disabled. The way that material is taught in schools does not work for many students, and is not seen as beneficial for them to know. The grading process has also been proven to negatively mentally affect students, and does not prepare them for college level coursework. As students, parents, and educators, it is important that we understand the flaws in our schools and demand better for ourselves and our children.

In order to understand where the school system is at now, it is important to be familiar with its roots. Grace Chen, a teacher who is interested in school reform, has stated that while there were schools in America since its inception, standardized schooling (and so, the beginning of modern schooling) did not begin until the US Department of Education was founded in 1867. While they have made changes throughout the years, the main goal of the public school system remains the same to them, "To promote student achievement and preparation for global

competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.” While this statement seems well meaning, it has never truly come to fruition.

Students with disabilities are at an inherent disadvantage in public schools through no fault of their own. In order to combat this disadvantage, many disabled students have what is known as an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP will contain special accommodations for the student in order to help them succeed. These accommodations may include anything from extra time on tests, not taking certain classes, subtitles on videos, and many more depending on the student. By law, a teacher is required to adhere to the IEP. However, many schools are unwilling or unable to meet the standards of certain IEPs. According to professors Center and Ward from Macquarie University, teachers do not feel confident in teaching disabled students. They feel that the schools do not properly prepare them for integration, or lack the funds to do so. In my personal experience, I find this to be true. Throughout high school, my IEP for my hearing loss would often be ignored by my teachers even when they were reminded. Because of this, my schoolwork was somewhat affected and I felt as if it did not matter that I have a disability. IEP’s exist for a reason; to help children with disabilities be on the same level with those who do not have them. A study done by the Congressional Research Service states that around 65% of students with disabilities graduate from high school, compared to the 82% rate of the general population.

So, why do students with disabilities graduate at a lower rate when they have IEP’s to help them succeed? The same study by the Congressional Research Service concludes that despite their disabilities, students with them are held to the same standards as students without disabilities. They are often expected to meet the graduation requirements for those without disabilities, even when this is blatantly unfair to them. Personally, I know that even with an IEP

Commented [VJ1]: Graduation stats

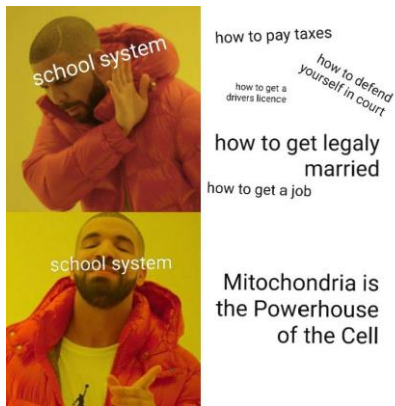
that is supposed to help me succeed, keeping up with the graduation standards can seem like an impossible task.

Disabled children are not the only ones affected by poor schooling. Children who are already at a socioeconomic disadvantage are disproportionately negatively affected in schools. A low socioeconomic status is defined as those who are at a disadvantage socially or economically. Students of color, LGBTQ+ students, and those who grow up in a low-income area or are low-income themselves fit into this category. Since schools are funded by local taxpayer dollars, students who attend schools in low-income areas will generally receive a lesser education. This keeps students in a poverty cycle, with little chance to succeed. According to Elsa Wiehe, an African studies teacher with experience in international education, this disproportionately affects students of color on top of other issues they may face. Redlining and the school-to-prison-pipeline are also factors that affect students of a lower socioeconomic status.

Redlining and the school-to-prison pipeline are buzzwords that are tossed around in the news and on political debates all the time, but what do they actually mean? They are both fairly simple seeming concepts that have a huge impact on the American school system, and what children do once they are out of school. According to the article 'Redlining and its Stealth Impact on Education' written by blogger and educator Becky LeBret, when the Federal Housing Administration was formed in 1934, they refused to insure the homes and mortgages of those in and around predominantly African-American neighborhoods. This encourages segregation. Those who could afford it left those neighborhoods, forcing most African-Americans to remain in urban slums. This process became known as redlining. While the article states that the redlining process technically became illegal in 1968, it also notes that its effects are still felt to this day and that it is nearly impossible to enforce the ban on redlining.

The concept of redlining goes hand-in-hand with the school-to-prison pipeline. Kyle Mackie, a reporter for National Public Radio (a government formed non-profit radio station), defines it as “a term that describes how American kids get pushed out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems.” Mackie cites that school policies, such as zero-tolerance policies and out of school suspensions, encourage children to not go to school and permanently punishes them for small misdemeanors. If a child is not in school, how are they expected to get an education and have a successful future?

How are these disadvantages reflected in the classroom? The answer is simple: grades. For many people, grades are the single most important part of the school experience. Even in the early years of school, your grades determine what classes you will take in the future. As a student ages up, their grades will possibly determine the rest of their life. Once a child is behind, it can be impossibly hard to catch back up. Disabled and socioeconomically disadvantaged students are more likely to fall behind in such a way and never catch back up. Students have a tendency to internalize their grades, and according to a study by Riita-Leena Metsapelto, this will affect their self-esteem and mental health. The study finds that students with lower grades (especially in math) will think more poorly about themselves. This can lead students into a vicious cycle of self-deprecation. In addition, many students do not feel a connection with the schoolwork they are doing. For instance, “the mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell” has become a popular online joke as it reflects what many students perceive as out of touch with their worlds.



(An example of such a meme, posted by Reddit user

Thecubesarmy_RO)

A survey done by the Harris Interactive website shows that over half (52%) of community college students feel that they were not prepared by their high school for college level work. The survey also shows that many students required a developmental course in either math or writing in order to keep up in college.

Students should not feel as if they are being held back by the school system. Students should be proud that they are able to get an education and learn information that will help them succeed. The fact that disabled students, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and even the average student all feel alienated by school and their work is extremely telling that something is wrong.

There is no easy solution to the problems presented by the current system without almost completely changing it. However, there are some baby steps schools can take in order to put their students on a better path. A pass/fail grading system has been proven to improve students' psychological well-being according to a study done by the UVA school of medication. In addition, career counseling in schools can greatly help students succeed. According to Jaideep Gupta for Entrepreneur magazine, many students do not consider what they actually like until it

is too late. He states that it is beneficial for students to have some sort of career counseling throughout their schooling so that they may choose a career they will enjoy and be good at. In conclusion, the school system is detrimental to students with disabilities and of a lower socioeconomic status, negatively affects self-esteem, and does not prepare students for college or career choice.

Students all across America deserve better. We as students, teachers, and parents want a good future for ourselves and our nation. It is time to stand up for ourselves, and demand an improvement.

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