

Should Have, Could Have: What Parents Regret About High School

By Robert L. Hampel

Each semester, my undergraduate history-of-education students ask their parents 10 questions about their time in high school. The interviews usually confirm what we discuss in class—the impact of protests in the late 1960s, the rise of special education, more female sports, and contrasts between rural and urban, Catholic and public schools.

But the replies to one question have surprised me: “If you could travel back in time, what would you change—in your own behavior or in the school itself—to make your high school experience better?”

Rather than fault their schools, most parents criticize themselves. Of the 178 respondents since 2007, 110 focused on their own behavior. Only 23 dwelt on the high school. Thirty-three others revisited both school and self. “Nothing” was the answer from eight, and four felt out of place because of acceleration or relocation.

Looking back, high school was a combination of studying, socializing, and joining. Nearly all of the 143 parents who would change their younger selves made comments in one or more of these three areas:

- *Study harder.* This was the point raised most often. Sixty respondents wished they had been more diligent. They spoke in general terms of more time and effort—trying harder—rather than describing particular study strategies they would have used. Eleven of the 60 regretted their choice of courses: They should have taken more college-prep or honors classes. Only six said they should have eased up, had more fun, and cared less about grades.
- *Friends.* There were 51 remarks on this subject, with 28 respondents recalling how shy and isolated they felt. If they could relive this time, they would be more outgoing, make new friends, or date more often. In contrast, nine said they were too obsessed with popularity, ignoring or teasing people they should have treated decently.
- *Extracurriculars.* Of the 44 comments, only two parents said they had done too much. Everyone else said they would either get involved more or stay involved. Many different sports and clubs were recalled as enjoyable experiences.

What could the school have done differently? Smaller classes, higher expectations, and different courses were recurring suggestions, but none was as common as the wish (from

12 parents) that guidance counselors had been more helpful. They either were not accessible or they were pessimistic. Even so, 143 of the 178 parents took personal responsibility for their disappointments and shortcomings, rather than blaming the teachers, administrators, or curriculum.

If these parents represent the opinion of middle-class America, then self-reliance has clearly not gone out of style. Will and stamina, making better decisions and sticking with them, and using the array of available opportunities wisely: Those are the lessons learned from high school by Americans now in their 40s and 50s.

What are the implications of these responses? First, that grassroots dissatisfaction with high schools may be less acute than policymakers'. Motivation and perseverance come from within, these parents seem to be saying, even if rules and regulations provide a system of incentives and penalties. Many know from experience that change begins when a student decides to push a bit more.

The second implication is that current school improvement initiatives may be too narrow. The federal Race to the Top competition and its reform counterparts overlook extracurriculars and friends. Education takes place in classrooms and depends on teachers and textbooks, many reformers assume. What young people learn from each other and from their coaches and advisers seems irrelevant to folks like U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Isn't life after the final bell the students' own time? How can educators intrude on socializing and playing, when they already dominate seven hours of each weekday? Don't we want engineers who know calculus rather than volleyball and Facebook?

Those objections miss the basic point my students' parents expressed. These adults wish they had been more engaged across the board—in academics, after school, and with other people. They regret holding back much more than jumping in. If these parents came to my class, I'd begin my discussion of their interviews by showing them the *carpe diem* scene in the film "Dead Poets Society," in which the teacher played by Robin Williams exhorts his prep school students to seize the day.

Schools teach rules of engagement. Either overtly or covertly, they tell students whether or not participation matters. Can Fred pass without talking in class as Mr. Smith lectures day after day? Does a chemistry lab require Linda, Yvonne, and Jose to work together? Are intramurals available to eager but less talented players? Does anyone ask questions when a boy without financial hardship prefers working a 20-hours-a-week, late-afternoon job over trying out for varsity debate? In many ways, educators can challenge students' avoidance of the abundance of educational, athletic, recreational, and social choices. And they also can take a stand if they see students overengage, needlessly exhausting themselves to impress college-admissions officers.

Many high schools do try to fight disengagement. The press for academic success is stronger today than 25 years ago, thanks to the tight alignment of curricular frameworks and state tests. Fewer students are anonymous whenever educators make good use of advisory periods, smaller classes, senior projects, and other efforts to combat isolation.

Still, if my students' children take my class in 2035, I hope their interviews report fewer should-haves and could-haves.

Robert L. Hampel, the author of *The Last Little Citadel: American High Schools Since 1940*, is the secretary/treasurer of the History of Education Society. He teaches at the University of Delaware, in Newark, Del.

Vol. 29, Issue 22, Pages 24-25