



# Reward Less, Get Less

*Student performance gaps are easily explained*

## *Flunked & Two Million Minutes*

As reviewed by Mark Bauerlein

Last spring, in Fairburn, Georgia, officials in two schools piloted a startling attendance program. If struggling 8th and 11th graders showed up for study hall, they could earn \$8 an hour, and if their grades and test scores rose significantly, they would receive a bonus. An Associated Press story termed the policy a “bribe,” and a Georgia State University professor on National Public Radio declared it “morally bankrupt.” But Ben Chavis, then principal of American Indian Public Charter School in East Oakland, California, had started paying students for attendance years ago with steady results, doubling math scores in the school over time. “Poor people love money,” he explains, so why not let it motivate the kids? He even met with drug dealers off campus and offered them \$5 for every truant they brought back. The cash came from creative budgeting, for instance, no computers for the kids. (“They can’t read,” he declares, “they don’t need a computer!”)

Chavis is one of a handful of school mavericks profiled in *Flunked*, a 45-minute documentary narrated by actor Joe Mantegna. The film reviews 50 years of public school investment, from *Sputnik* to No Child Left Behind, and derives a simple lesson: the claim “more money makes more success” is a myth, “the tallest tale of them all.” In spite of massive investment and however you measure it, one commenter says, academic achievement “looks like somebody just died—it’s just a flat line.” Success lies not in raising dollars but in changing the organization.

The “all-stars” in *Flunked* illustrate how it can happen. They are “entrepreneurial principals,” headstrong heroes who rescue failing schools, run charters, tighten discipline, and lower dropout rates. Steve Barr runs Green Dot Public Schools in Los Angeles, which divides dysfunctional high schools into small charter schools. His first principle: get every dollar into classrooms. He pays teachers well and grants them wide latitude in the classroom in exchange for a “dismissal-for-cause” condition in their contracts. Howard Lappin, who took on a high school in L.A.—“1,600 kids, out-of-control school, violent, terrible test scores”—recites his message for kids: “if you’re not in class you’re in trouble—your parents are gonna be in—we’re gonna talk to you—you’re not gonna be here—you got to do what you got to do because this is a school—this is not a playground.”

The ingredients are plain and they don’t include “Give us more money.”

- Provide strict discipline, longer hours, high expectations
- Give teachers high pay and discretion in the classroom, but hold them to professional standards
- Reduce bureaucracy

A sound approach for these schools, but on the evidence of another recent school documentary, the lessons of *Flunked* may not apply as we move up the U.S. public school ladder. *Two Million Minutes* profiles two high schoolers in Bangalore, India, two in Shanghai, China, and two in Carmel High School outside Indianapolis. Ranked in the top 5 percent of U.S. public schools, Carmel has loads of money and top-notch facilities. No need to fire any teachers or collar truants. But, as the film unfolds, a striking deficiency among the American students emerges, one that no in-school policy can address—the drive to compete with their peers.

“Competitiveness,” of course, has become a touchstone of education debate. Two years ago in the *Washington Post*, Bill Gates warned that unless Americans hit the workplace with math and science skills, they will sink in the knowledge economy and take their nation with them. But American students appear unaffected by what one commenter after another says in *Two Million Minutes*: We are in a global competition, and we’re losing. From 1985 to 2004, the proportion of bachelor’s degrees awarded in math or science in this country fell from 21.7 to 15.8 percent. Engineering went from 9.8 to 6.2 percent, and the numbers won’t improve soon. On the 2006 American Freshman Survey, only 0.8 percent of entering college students intended to major in math, 0.5 percent in physics. These fields are a micro-niche.

For Asian students, though, math and science degrees are the way to prosperity. These students live with “economic uncertainty,” the film explains, and view math and science study as a form of “economic opportunism,” a “passport out of poverty.” The girl from India wants to be rich, and she terms engineering the “safest” field. She attends a two-hour math tutorial that starts at 7:45 each Saturday morning, and after a break, three more hours of class follow. The boy from India aims to be a physicist (as are his father and sister), and he spends 12 hours a week in evening sessions preparing for the Indian Institute of Technology entrance exam. A half million take the test and only 5,000 win admission. The Chinese boy took his

first standardized test in 1st grade, and his regular school day lasts nine hours. He doesn't claim to be number one, but he loves to win and is, in fact, the top math student in his school. It's not all math and science. Though the Chinese girl wants a biology career, along with her full school schedule she studies ballet and violin.

And the suburban American kids? The boy is senior class president and a National Merit semifinalist, and the girl ranks in the top 3 percent of her class. He admits, though, "Occasionally, I do homework," and for a big class project due on Monday he starts preparing a day earlier. She claims to "set high expectations," but adds, "I'm not that 9-to-5 kind of girl." She favors medicine because "you get an awesome feeling, it's really a rewarding experience, I think, being able to, um, save lives." She's "well-rounded," which means doing homework with friends while watching *Grey's Anatomy*. He doesn't "ever want a cubicle," so he works 20 hours a week in a pasta joint and does graphics for the school paper.

Teachers reflect the same laxity. When handing out an exam, the Carmel teacher assures his students that on one question, "I will accept three of the four answers." In the Indian classroom, the teacher explains the steps in a calculation and

concludes, "Nobody should say 'I don't know how to find the tangent.'" When the students pause, she blurts out, "Why are you simply standing there?" Nobody chides the American kids like that.

The American boy wins early admission and a full ride to Purdue, while the American girl gets into Indiana University. They are accepted into top universities, so why work any harder? The policies advocated in *Flunked* are not the answer here. More money in the classroom and less bureaucracy in the schools will make no difference, nor will stricter discipline or higher expectations as long as the college acceptances come through.

Not one of the Asian kids gets into the first-choice college. That outcome explains the relative efforts, and it puts the American high performers in a dismaying light. Asian kids don't talk about their "awesome" feelings of helping people. They talk about how it feels to beat the kids sitting next to them. If the American boy and girl landed in an Asian classroom, they would sink to the bottom in a week. Call it classroom Darwinism with predictable results. It's a survival-of-the-smartest world, with few survivors.

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