workload. I considered the request ridiculous—what with my emerging NBA career just getting under way and all. Besides, it wasn’t as if I were a mediocre student; I was the best in the entire class.

After graduation, I decided to attend the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the flagship of the UW system. I was a little cocky going in; I figured that if anyone in my entire high school was prepared for college, I was. My experience, however, suggests that none of my high-school classmates was prepared for college. My first few years at Madison were disastrous. Whereas in high school I had taken introductory calculus, I was forced into remedial math at Madison (not even introductory algebra or geometry). I fared no better in the physical sciences. Three of my high-school friends eventually dropped out, never to graduate from college.

After floundering initially, I resolved to do whatever was necessary to do well. I spent many hours in professors’ offices, tutorials, and reading groups. I eventually recovered, with quite excellent grades in my final two years. But one cannot entirely recover—GPA-wise—from such a poor start.

My undergraduate experience was both humbling and belittling. Even today—a Ph.D. in philosophy under my belt, a J.D. in the works—my academic confidence remains fragile. My high school created a false sense of aptitude and competence and failed to provide me with the foundation on which all of my secondary learning was to be built. It is often thought that if children simply work hard and are supported by their parents, they can overcome substandard schooling. It’s true that many students do excel despite their woeful schools. But more prevalent are cases like mine: students for whom the rigors of college life were a rude awakening, to whom their schools did an enormous disservice by expecting less than they were capable of.

Personal initiative and parent support are indispensable pieces of the educational jigsaw. It is a mistake, however, to treat them as sufficient. It is equally important that schools enforce standards of educational excellence at every grade level. In the absence of an unflinching, daily reaffirmation of standards of educational excellence, the structural disadvantages common to many public schools—the poorly paid and underqualified teachers, the crumbling facilities—inevitably begin to encroach on, and then to corrupt, the learning environment.

My educational biography speaks to no particular proposal for education reform. However, there is one reform that my story might seem to support, but which may do more harm than good. One way of enforcing standards of excellence is through standardized testing, linked to high stakes—such as holding students back until they pass the tests or delaying their graduation.

This would be fine if their schools were receiving the funds necessary to hire good teachers and to create an inspiring environment for learning. Otherwise children are just being held hostage to their schools’ failings. Unless we transform urban schools, it may be better simply to let students move on and find their way. I did.

Jeffrey Jones is an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Massachusetts–Boston. He is currently on leave attending the University of Michigan Law School.

My high school created a false sense of aptitude and competence.

Low Expectations

Straight A’s, yet not ready for college

My high school was certified as “college preparatory.” I was able to take introductory calculus, advanced chemistry and biology, and even several English literature courses for college credit. I graduated as valedictorian of my decent-sized class, with just over a 3.9 GPA.

However, as my father often observed with great frustration, I rarely spent my evenings doing homework; I was able to finish my work during class or in study halls. What bothered him was that I wasn’t being challenged by my high school. So he thought that I should go beyond the assigned