The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids  
By Alexandra Robbins  
Hyperion, 2006, $24.95; 448 pages.

As reviewed by Diane Ravitch

When I was in public high school about a thousand years ago, life was very different. Half of my classmates at San Jacinto High School in Houston didn’t have any interest in going to college. Most of the rest aimed to go to the University of Texas or other local universities. I was one of the few who wanted to enroll in an Ivy League college, so I did not experience peer pressure for grades (although there was plenty of peer pressure associated with clothing, dating, popularity, and looks). At that time (the mid-1950s) students never learned their SAT scores; the guidance counselor knew, but she wasn’t allowed to tell. With her help, we somehow managed to figure out which college might be the best fit, even without knowing our scores.

Many other things were different about the world of American teens half a century ago. Television was a recent technological innovation and most of the programming consisted of reruns. The news came on about dinnertime, and we were generally unaware of most stuff that was happening outside our community and city. After school, we had time to drive around town to hang out with friends at a drive-in hamburger place. The biggest danger we faced was driving recklessly, since we were on the whole irresponsible and believed like all teenagers in our immortality. Drinking was a problem, but drugs were nonexistent. And there was almost always a grownup at home.

All of this, of course, was before Sputnik, before the various crises of the 1960s. It was, in retrospect, a halcyon time. Reading Alexandra Robbins’s The Overachievers, I was struck by the contrast between the relatively peaceful world I lived in and the frantic, high-pressure world of the young people she describes. Robbins returned to her alma mater, Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, Maryland, to follow several high-achieving students as they negotiate their way from high school to college (one of the students she tracks is a freshman at Harvard). The storyline seems to be that she, an overachiever, wants to reveal through anecdote and insight, the brutal stress that today’s schools, tests, and parents exert on students who are just a bit younger than she.

Robbins tends to generalize from the experiences of her gallery of high school stars, forgetting that they represent a tiny sliver—perhaps 1 percent—of students their age. Consequently, she makes sweeping statements about an entire generation when her evidence is drawn almost entirely from the unusual lives of an elite population.

These are extraordinary young people, to be sure. Julie has an unblemished record of straight As through junior and senior high school. She took at least eight Advanced Placement courses. She is an excellent athlete and was co-captain of the school’s track team. In addition to a long string of other activities, she was a buddy to a child in a homeless shelter. Each of the students featured has an equally impressive résumé, which they have apparently been building since 6th grade, or maybe since birth.

Here are students in one of the nation’s most affluent districts and most successful high schools, yet in Robbins’s telling they are on the verge of failing apart. In response to the pressure to compete and succeed, they succumb to depression, anxiety, eating disorders, even thoughts of suicide. Young people in the United States today, she says, are suffering because of “school stress, the college admissions process, high-stakes testing, cutthroat competition, the emphasis on stardom rather than on enjoyment of activities, sleep deprivation, parental pressure, the push for perfectionism, the need for escapism, the Age of Comparison, [and] the loss of leisure and childhood...” Among her favorite culprits for this state of affairs are testing in general, the SAT in particular, the “Nation at Risk” report, and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which she believes turned elementary schools and junior high schools into testing factories.

She tosses out statistics to buttress her arguments, but most of them seem to be collected from newspaper articles. Though she castigates the “Nation at Risk” report, she seems never to have read it, nor to have read the many serious studies that take a deeper look at the issues that concern her. She ignores the fact that many of the statistics she cites were compiled before NCLB was passed. She handily dismisses those who worry about our students’ poor performance on international tests, saying, “So what? So what if a continent produces more scientific papers than the United States? So what if a country isn’t ranked number one going into the next educational season? Students shouldn’t be government pawns in a race for global superiority. Why can’t a country be good at what it’s good at and not panic if it’s not the best at everything? Why should education be a competition?”

Near the end she pretty much defines the tone of her book when she writes, “But stories are more important than...”
Thus, she tosses off somebody’s number about the wide-scale elimination of recess after the passage of NCLB or the many hours of homework that American students must do every night. She does not seem to realize that government data and reputable scholars do not share her impassioned views. It may be that the rather small proportion of very high performing students have too much homework, but studies by Tom Loveless of Brookings, for example, indicate that most American students still do not spend much time on school work. TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) reported a few years ago that most American high school students spend at least 20 hours per week in part-time jobs, unlike their counterparts in other nations.

Robbins has a long list of solutions to the problem of pressure on high school teens: Start the school day later, so kids can sleep later; drop class rankings; de-emphasize testing and rely instead on portfolios and projects; offer more activities that are noncompetitive; limit the number of AP classes. She advises colleges to boycott rankings like those done by U.S. News & World Report, drop the SAT as a tool for admissions, and eliminate early decisions.

None of these is a bad idea, although one wonders what measures will be substituted by highly selective colleges for the SAT and class rankings. As Robbins points out in the book, the number of students who want to go to prestigious colleges has soared, but the number of places in those colleges has not changed much over the past few decades. Those colleges that have 10 or more applicants per place need some way to choose one of the 10. If they drop the SAT, will they rely instead on high school grades, which are notoriously unreliable? Or will they ignore four years of coursework and rely instead on students’ essays?

We should all want students (and their parents) to live in ways that are fulfilling without unnecessarily inflicting anxiety, depression, and despair on them. My guess is that the world is being changed by technology in ways that inflict pressure on all of us. We are bombarded 24/7 by more information than we can absorb. The scramble for the greatest rewards in the most elite professions has grown more intense than ever. Parents clearly want their children to get the highest-status credentials (not necessarily the best education, but the best credentials) to advance them in the competition for the top of the greasy pole.

Even if schools started an hour later and even if all tests were abolished, it is unlikely that any of us has the power to roll back the trends and competitive pressures that have become so much a part of all of our lives.

Diane Ravitch is research professor of education, New York University, and a member of the Koret Task Force at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

---

**Position Available:**

**Senior Program Officer, Washington**

The Senior Program Officer for Education will manage and lead the foundation’s programmatic giving as well as its advocacy strategies in Washington. The Senior Program Officer will work with the Director for Washington State in setting strategic grantmaking priorities and building relationships with other funding partners and grantees. A high level of cooperation and coordination is required to link the program work to public affairs and programmatic investments.

The ideal candidate is an experienced grantmaker in the field of public education, notably holding a deep understanding of improvement at both public school and district levels.

Unlike other states in which the foundation works, Washington is unique in that its program and advocacy efforts span early learning and high school reform. An existing Senior Program Officer guides the foundation’s early learning work. Both Senior Program Officers report to the Director and are supported by a small team dedicated to Washington state education.

To apply, please visit www.gatesfoundation.org/aboutus/employment where you can search for the job and apply directly. Please combine a cover letter and resume into a single file that you can submit to us for this opening from our Web site.

Due to the volume of inquiries and applications we receive on a regular basis, the online application is the best and only way to ensure that your submissions are reviewed in a timely manner.

*We are an equal opportunity employer dedicated and focused on diversity.*