

“Parents... Shifted Their Definition of Success”

Summit Schools cofounder Diane Tavenner on the secrets of student happiness

EDUCATION NEXT'S senior editor, Paul E. Peterson, recently interviewed Diane Tavenner, cofounder and chief education officer of Summit Schools, and the author of *Prepared: What Kids Need for a Fulfilled Life*.

Paul E. Peterson: Why did you decide to take on the enormous challenge of creating a brand-new public charter school in the richest corner of the United States, Silicon Valley?

Diane Tavenner: I was an educator, a teacher, and then a school principal in traditional schools for a number of years, and no matter how hard I worked, I kept running up against brick walls, preventing me from doing what I believed in. . . . The final piece is I was pregnant with my first and only child. And everything changes when you become a parent and you start thinking about education through the lens of your own child.

What were some of the “brick walls”?

The biggest one was how narrow the focus is in most schools and how siloed education is in high schools. Most high schools are still focused on teaching kids separate subjects hour by hour in a relatively traditional manner, using a combination of textbooks, lectures, and testing. We know from science and our own experiences that that’s not the best way to prepare kids for today’s world. They need preparation in a much more dynamic set of skills, including hard academic skills, but also the habits and mindsets they need to be successful and engaged people.

Your book reminded me of one by Ted Sizer, *Horace’s Compromise*. In it he writes, “the American high school student is all too often docile, compliant, and without initiative.” Is that what you’re saying? That the system creates bored students who are compliant and without initiative?

Yes. Actually, the system incentivizes that and really disincentivizes students who want to assert their autonomy, and it doesn’t help students build self-direction. As a mother and an educator, I try to build my child’s and all of our kids’ ability to have agency and self-direct their learning. That is a cornerstone of our school model. Kids aren’t just born with the ability to own their own destiny and journey. That requires skills that, just like reading and math, can be developed, and they have a place in our schools.

You have a remarkable record at Summit Schools, with 98 percent of the students going on to a four-year college, and you believe you have accomplished that by arousing the curiosity and the initiative of the young person. How do you do that?

We start with a project-based curriculum. Students who stay with us through middle and high school engage in about 200 different real-world, authentic learning experiences or projects. They don’t start with a “unit of study,” and we don’t say, “You are going to learn about the causes of World War II, or a specific type of grammar, or the quadratic formula.” Instead, we ask a big question that’s interesting to them.

From reading your book, I know you emphasize cooperation and collaboration and de-emphasize competition. It’s not a matter of who’s going to get into which Ivy League college; it’s a matter of “how do we all get what we want?” How important is that to your strategy?

It’s incredibly important. In most schools, they stack-rank kids by GPA. That means the kids on the top are benefiting from those on the bottom, and the school is benefiting from those on the top being successful. It’s designed to produce winners and losers and for students to be judged on single, narrow measures. At Summit, we try to recognize that every one of our students has hopes, and dreams, and wishes, and strengths, and things to contribute, and areas where they need to grow, and they don’t all want the same things out of life.

Our kids do eight weeks a year of expeditionary learning where they can figure out what their strengths are and try new things, and rule things out. What we’re searching for is the best fit for them.

Believe it or not, not everyone wants to go to Harvard. What’s better is when students find a good fit that matches who they are: for economic reasons, geographic reasons, their future aspirations, all of those things. When you think about what each individual wants and help them drive toward that outcome, versus a single outcome for a select few, you can help everyone succeed.

I can see that you can persuade students of that, but how about their parents? Their definition of success may be much more competitive than the one you’re describing here. How do you explain your mission to the parents?

One of the things we have discovered as we’ve shared the Summit model in 40 states through the Summit Learning Program, and in conversation with parents across the country, is that parents actually have shifted their definition of success. It’s still important to them that their kids have economic stability in their adult lives, but they also want them to be happy, have good lives, do what they want to do, have good relationships.

Most parents think other parents have a much more traditional definition of success that’s about status, power, and wealth, so they are quiet about their beliefs because they think they aren’t shared. The primary reason I wrote the book was to help parents realize they’re not alone. In fact, the parents who want their kids to be happy are a majority in this country.

As parents, we need to be open and vocal about this. We’re hoping to build a movement and let the world know that lots of people believe in this new idea of success and how we should be preparing kids for the future.

This is an edited excerpt from an Education Exchange podcast, which can be heard at educationnext.org.



Diane Tavenner

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