



# Advocacy for Gifted and Talented in New York

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## **When Every Child is Good Enough**

By: John Tierney

"THE Incredibles" is not just an animated adventure for children, at least not to the parents and teachers who have been passionately deconstructing the story of a family of superheroes trapped in suburbia. The movie has reignited one of the oldest debates about child-rearing and society: competition versus coddling, excellence versus egalitarianism.

Is Dash, the supersonic third-grader forbidden from racing on the track team, a gifted child held back by the educational philosophy that "everybody is special"? Or is he an over-privileged elitist being forced to take into account the feelings of others?

Is his father, Mr. Incredible, who complains that the schools "keep inventing new ways to celebrate mediocrity," a visionary reformer committed to pushing children to excel? Or is he a reactionary in red tights who's been reading too much Nietzsche and Ayn Rand?

Is Syndrome, the geek villain trying to kill the superheroes, an angry Marxist determined to quash individuality? Or is his plan to give everyone artificial superpowers an uplifting version of "cooperative learning" in an "inclusion classroom"?

At one level, the debate is over current controversies in public education: Many parents believe that their children, mostly in elite schools, are being pushed too hard in a hypercompetitive atmosphere. But other parents are complaining about a decline in programs for gifted children, leaving students to languish in "untracked" and un-stimulating classrooms. Some critics of education believe that boys especially are languishing in schools that emphasize cooperation instead of competition. No Child Left Behind, indeed.

But the basic issue is the same one raised four decades ago by Kurt Vonnegut in "Harrison Bergeron," a short story set in the America of 2081, about a 14-year-old genius and star athlete. To keep others from feeling inferior, the Handicapper General weighs him down with 300-pound weights and makes him wear earphones that blast noise, so he cannot take "unfair advantage" of his brain.

That's hardly the America of 2004, but today's children do grow up with soccer leagues and spelling bees where everyone gets a prize. On some playgrounds dodge ball is deemed too traumatic to the dodging-impaired. Some parents consider musical chairs dangerously exclusionary.

Children are constantly feted for accomplishments that used to be routine. They may not all be honored at a fourth-grade graduation ceremony - the event in the movie that inspires Mr. Incredible's complaint about mediocrity - but they all hear the mantra recited by Dash's sister in response to his ambitions.

"Everyone's special, Dash," she says.

"Which is another way of saying no one is," he replies.

The villain, Syndrome, makes the same point when he envisions empowering the masses with his inventions.

"Everybody will be super, which means no one will be," he says, gleeful that he will finally have revenge on Mr. Incredible for snubbing him during his childhood.

He may be the villain, but you could also see his psychopathology as evidence of the bad effects of status-seeking among children. Even the winners can be victims of competition, said Denise Clark Pope, the author of "Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic and Mis-educated Students."

"When learning becomes about competing with your peers to get ahead, what gets learned is how to compete and not how to learn," said Dr. Pope, a lecturer at Stanford University's school of education. "Kids learn to cheat, to raise their hands even when they don't know the answers, to form alliances instead of learning the material we want them to understand."

Her attitude is shared by some parents, especially ones whose children are frantically competing at exclusive private and suburban schools. But fans of competition complain that it's been de-emphasized for most students. Some schools have dropped honor rolls and class rankings, and the old practice of routinely segregating smart students in separate tracks has given way to the heterogeneous "inclusion classroom."

Competition has long been out of fashion at education schools, as indicated in a 1997 survey of 900 of their professors by Public Agenda, a nonprofit public opinion research group. Only a third of the professors considered rewards like honor rolls to be valuable incentives for learning, while nearly two-thirds said schools should avoid competition.

To some critics, that cooperative philosophy is one reason that so many boys like Dash are bored at school. "Professors of education think you can improve society by making people less competitive," said Christina Hoff Sommers, author of "The War Against Boys" and a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. "But males are wired for competition, and if you take it away there's little to interest them in school."

In his new book, "Hard America, Soft America," Michael Barone puts schools in the soft category and warns that they leave young adults unprepared for the hard world awaiting them in the workplace. "The education establishment has been too concerned with fostering kids' self-esteem instead of teaching them to learn and compete," he said.

The No Child Left Behind Act was an attempt to put more rigor into the system by punishing schools whose students don't pass standardized tests, but it has had unintended consequences for high achievers. Administrators have been cutting funds for gifted-student programs and concentrating money and attention on the failing students.

"In practice, No Child Left Behind has meant No Child Gets Ahead for gifted students," said Joyce Clark, a planner in the Pittsburgh public schools' gifted program. "There's no incentive to worry about them because they can pass the tests."

"The Incredibles" might take comfort from a recent report, "A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students," by the John Templeton Foundation. It summarizes research showing that gifted children thrive with more advanced material and describes their current frustration

in prose that sounds like Dash: "When they want to fly, they are told to stay in their seats. Stay in your grade. Know your place. It's a national scandal."

But if they do fly, what happens to the children left on the ground? One of the report's authors, Nicholas Colangelo, a professor at the University of Iowa who is an expert in gifted education, pointed to research indicating the left-behind do not suffer academically or emotionally.

Other scholars say that these children feel stigmatized and demoralized, and that in practice, a tracking system tends to discriminate against poor and minority students.

"The public generally seems to have caught on to the social undesirability of claiming educational privileges for students who are already relatively privileged," said Jeannie Oakes, a professor of educational equity at the University of California, Los Angeles. "Superhero kids don't exist in such abundance that we need to develop special and separate programs for whole classes of them."

The movie never quite resolves the issue. In the end, Dash is allowed to race but is coached not to get too far ahead of the pack. The writer and director, Brad Bird, offered a less ambiguous answer in an interview. "Wrong-headed liberalism seeks to give trophies to everyone just for existing," he said. "It seems to render achievement meaningless. That's a weird goal."

He sounded very much like Professor Colangelo, who says that children want to compete and can cope with defeat a lot better than adults imagine. "Life hurts your feelings," Mr. Bird said. "I think people whine about stuff too much. C'mon, man, just get up and do it."

John M. Broder contributed reporting from Los Angeles for this article