



Documentary at MCC spurs dialogue on school stress, over-testing of kids

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By Stacie Spring, Tribune |

Students, teachers, professors, administrators and parents came together Tuesday night at Mesa Community College to view a 2009 documentary on the stress and over-testing of K-12 students and participate in a panel discussion on the issues that schools, students and families face.

"I felt it was a very compelling story," said Tawn Hauptli, PhD., an MCC education faculty member who organized the event. "We all felt it was worth seeing, worth having a community dialogue about."

Over the last few years, a number of documentaries have tried to detail the challenges that students in American public school face. From funding to preparing teachers, to homework debates to charter schools, documentaries explore the challenges of public schools and often propose solutions.

While one of the most popular in this genre, "Waiting for Superman," seems to make the point that schools are not rigorous enough and students are quietly passed from grade to grade without learning much of anything, the film shown Tuesday — "Race to Nowhere" — focuses on how many students are over-tested, over-stressed and willing to do anything to get good grades.

"I was a little confused," said Rodney Holmes, PhD., MCC Dean of Instruction. "This was really only about the top one or two percent of students trying to get into the top one or two percent of schools."

However, a few parents voiced concerns about their children, who in elementary school, had daily homework.

An increase in homework became a common response to the No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2001, said Noreen Roman, a Gilbert high school psychologist. However, homework is only effective at different levels at different ages.

Another impact of No Child Left Behind was the increase in student testing.

"We use test scores like they're stack," said Joe Thomas, vice president of Arizona Education Association and a former high school government teacher in Mesa. "The same year we were required to have third graders proficient in reading, we stopped funding all-day kindergarten."

In "Race to Nowhere," students tell of their experiences with anorexia, insomnia, hours of homework, tutoring centers, extra curricular activities to pad college applications and cheating to receive higher marks.

"We (have a tendency to) teach the way we were taught," said . "In teaching in different ways, by using different methods rather than only the way we were taught, we can change the way students learn."

Rather than teaching students to be generalists or specialists, Dr. Kenneth Flemming, a middle school principal in Glendale while also adjunct faculty at MCC, suggests teaching students to be "versatilists."

"Learning for me came when my hands were on it, more than when I was reading about it," Flemming said. "We have to teach multiple intelligence, to solve real world problems."

By giving homework, teachers are often trying to reinforce skills they didn't have enough time to reinforce during the school hours, Roman said. With the quick pace of curriculum, there isn't time to wait for all students to fully grasp every concept.

"It's not reinforcing anymore, it's, 'do this so we can move on,'" she said. "They're being handcuffed."

So students, in turn, use other methods to get better grades, the documentary suggests. They may turn to the ADHD medication Adderall to focus on their homework; they may work late in the night; they may begin to cheat off of classmates.

"You'd be surprised how many kids are graduating from high school and doing remedial courses," said Holmes. "It's the drill factor, but we're not teaching them to learn."

One of the observations by the filmmaker is that schools of the future may not look much like the schools of the last 100 years, possibly more organically integrating play, creativity and exploration into the school day.

"By saying schools haven't changed in the last 100 years overlooks the changes we have made," Thomas said. "100 years ago, there wasn't the technology we have now and there may not have been girls in classrooms."

Classes wouldn't have been broken up by grade and learning level and there wouldn't have been black students in classrooms if it was a white school, Thomas said.

Hauptli hopes to continue the discussion with the community. For future updates to the discussion, email Hauptli at tawn.hauptli@mesacc.edu.

Contact writer: (480) 898-5645 or sspring@evtrib.com

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