Whatever Happened To Competition in School?

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When it comes to the Olympic Games, everyone seems to understand that competition produces the winners and the record-breakers. It's unlikely that the athletes could reach such heights of achievement and endurance if they were not competing against other athletes who are closely matched in skills and putting forth their very best.

Some people, however, are at war against the whole concept of competition. They think it is undemocratic, unfair, and elitist. It's a sign of the times that, in Cecil County, Maryland, basketball is now played by some very unusual rules.

If one basketball team is ten points ahead of the other, additional baskets don't count until the underdog team catches up. No record is kept of who scores how many baskets, so no player can ever be recognized as the star of the team.

This system should be called Outcome-Based Basketball because it's just like the Outcome-Based Education (OBE) that has spread through our public schools like a contagious disease. OBE is sometimes called Performance-Based Education.

OBE's advocates mouth the mantra "self-esteem." Since the lack of self-esteem is postulated to be the cause of all social ills (crime, illegal drugs, teenage pregnancies, AIDS, and low SAT scores), OBE's primary goal is to inculcate self-esteem.

There is no evidence that lack of self-esteem causes those problems, nor is there any evidence that having self-esteem causes students to score better in academic subjects. At best, teaching self-esteem is a waste of precious classroom time and, at worst, it's teaching the wrong lesson that it's okay to feel good about doing poorly in school.

Self-esteem should be the reward that comes from achievement and hard work. It should be earned. But lack of evidence doesn't slow down the self-esteem peddlers because this mantra advances their goal of eliminating all competition from the school experience.

Outcome-Based Education has been properly labelled a dumbing-down of public school education. But it's even worse than reducing the amount of knowledge covered and failing to teach essential skills such as reading.

The combination of OBE and self-esteem eliminates competition as a learning mechanism. This destroys the students' incentive to be the best they can be, and it destroys the school's accountability because parents have no way to measure what their children are doing.

In an OBE school, the traditional A, B, C, D and F are replaced by letters that are meaningless in terms of specific academic achievement, such as S for Satisfactory (sometimes it just means Sometimes) or G for Growth. William Glasser's 1969 book "Schools Without Failure" led the charge against traditional grades.

Glasser also argued that giving homework is unfair and elitist because A and B students usually do their homework, whereas poor students don't, thus widening the gap between those who succeed and those who fail in school. He even opposed objective tests because they require students to give correct answers, in contrast to tests that ask questions for which there are no right answers.

The anti-competition movement is galloping across America. Schools are getting rid of their honor roll, honors courses, class rankings, academic prizes, and even valedictorians. Spelling bees are out. If fact, even correct spelling is out; it's replaced by inventive spelling (so students can spell words any way they want).

Ability grouping, or tracking, is forbidden as elitist, undemocratic, or even racist. Pity the poor teacher who has to present a single course of study to eighth graders whose reading ability ranges from the second to the twelfth grades. This problem is getting worse with the mainstreaming of the learning disabled.

OBE does not allow any student to progress faster or farther than the slowest child in the class. This system conceals the fact that some children aren't learning much of anything.

What is the teacher to do with the faster learners after they complete the assigned material? They are required to do peer tutoring (trying to tutor the slower pupils) or "horizontal enrichment." The former is a frustration for all students, and the latter is busywork.

Cooperative Learning, in which students receive a group grade, is another means of concealing who does the assignment accurately and who goofs off. The brighter students soon learn that their effort is not rewarded, and the slower students learn that there's no reason to try because someone will given them the answers.

The testing system has been corrupted. Not only do all students score "above average" (a marvel of statistical fakery), but many tests are peppered with questions that ask for non-objective responses about feelings, attitudes or predictions, or which have a built-in bias toward Political Correctness.

The response to the dramatic decline in SAT scores over the last two decades has resulted, not in toughening the curriculum, but in raising every student's score 100 points, so now students get perfect scores even if they have some wrong answers. This is one more way of concealing the distinction between average and above-average students.

Competition needs to be restored if schools are to prepare students for life. Children should learn early that life is competition, and the rewards go to those who work hard, persevere and achieve.