



Fall Speaker
Thursday, October 19, 2017
Sidwell Friends School

**Raising Caring, Empathetic and Happy Children:
Strategies for Parents and Educators**

Richard Weissbourd

This year's Fall Speaker Event featured Richard Weissbourd, who addressed an audience of more than 200 parents, teachers and administrators at Sidwell Friends School. Kathy Stallings, President of the Parents Council of Washington (PCW) and Sally Selby, the Interim Lower School Principal at Sidwell Friends, welcomed attendees. Richard Weissbourd was introduced and welcomed by PCW Event Co-Chair, Wendy Gagnon.

Richard Weissbourd is the Director of the Human Development and Psychology Program and the Co-Director of the *Making Caring Common* Project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. *Making Caring Common* is a national effort to make moral and social development priorities in child-raising and education.

Weissbourd commenced by discussing the intense focus on happiness and achievement in today's society. He surveyed more than 40,000 students from across the country and asked them to prioritize amongst caring, achievement and happiness. 50% of respondents selected achievement as the highest priority, 30% selected happiness and 20% chose caring. Students were also asked about their parents' priorities. On that question, achievement ranked even higher. Students were three times more likely to agree than disagree with the following statement: "My parents are prouder if I get good grades in my classes than if I'm a caring community member in class and school."

Weissbourd commented that there is an unprecedented focus on achievement and happiness. In past times, there has been much more emphasis on community involvement and caring. He noted that the burden of raising caring children has often been the mother's responsibility. Weissbourd said that while parents may believe that caring is important, parents and schools often deliver the message (either inadvertently or on purpose) that achievement and happiness are more important. As examples, he said that dinner table conversations can focus on achievement and parents may not emphasize the importance of gratitude or the need for their children to reach out to friendless kids.

Surprisingly a focus on happiness does not make children happier. Parents can end up actually depriving their children of coping strategies. Parents can become “mood meteorologists,” causing kids to be too occupied with their own emotional states, rather than with others. Weissbourd urged parents to avoid telling children to be caring because it will make them happy. Sacrifice may be involved. There are many things that a person needs to do because it’s the right thing to do.

Weissbourd also addressed race, class and cultural differences. He noted that for many low income and working class youth, achievement and hard work have a clear moral purpose.

Weissbourd asked why caring has become less important. In a survey, most parents stated that the problem is due to other parents who focus on achievement. He made the point that the problem is rooted at the individual level, and it is up to parents as individuals, and schools as institutions, to make a difference. He noted that schools used to focus on ethical character development. But now they are achievement-focused, at all levels of education. In addition, there has been an evaporation of religion from daily life, whereas religion used to be a wide-reaching conduit for teaching ethical behavior.

Weissbourd also discussed another trend – the constant praising of kids. He said that this can make children feel like they are constantly being assessed and lead to competitiveness. He recommended that parents only praise when truly warranted, and to make praise specific.

He noted that the focus on achievement can have unintended results. There are two populations that are particularly at risk in the U.S. for anxiety and depression – low-income children and high-income children. While one might think that affluence would be protective, in fact girls from high-income families are two to three times more likely to suffer depression than the average person. He gave some examples of where a focus on achievement can cause stress: parents may seek an unwarranted diagnosis of ADHD to enable extra time on the SAT; parents may pay steep fees for college counselors; and, some parents may even hire SAT tutors starting in middle school. He further noted that there seems to be a “community service Olympics,” where families “compete” to find the “best” or most unique social service opportunity for their kids, out of a belief that it will impress colleges.

Weissbourd pointed out that at the college level, 25-30% of elite college students seek treatment for anxiety or depression. But, symptoms can disappear once kids find meaning in what they are doing. He also stressed that there are many, many good colleges and parents need to focus less on the so-called “elite” schools and more on what may be the best possible fit for their particular child.

Some college admissions programs are trying to change the message about what they are looking for. Weissbourd has launched a program called *Turning the Tide* to reach out to high schools and universities to emphasize the following in admissions:

1. Promoting more meaningful contributions to others, community service and engagement with the public good.
2. Assessing students' ethical engagement and contributions to others in ways that reflect varying types of family and community contributions across race, culture and class.
3. Redefining achievement in ways that both level the playing field for economically diverse students and reduce excessive achievement pressure.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Weissbourd emphasized that the focus on achievement is a collective problem that needs to be collectively addressed. The current culture has created an arms race, leading to public health problems including anxiety, depression and suicide.

He offered seven practical tips for raising caring, ethical children:

1. **Make caring a priority.**
2. **Caring is a muscle that needs to be practiced.** It is analogous to learning a sport or an instrument. Chores should be an expectation.
3. **Expand children's circles of concern.** Parents and kids should strive to have empathy for people outside of their immediate environment and particularly those from different cultures or settings.
4. **Encourage kids to be ethical philosophers.** Encourage them to think through and discuss ethical dilemmas.
5. **Reflective adult modeling.** Parents should be living, breathing role models who can make mistakes, but provide a good example.
6. **Liberate kindness from shame, jealousy, anger and stereotypes.** These emotions can sometimes block caring and kindness.
7. **Put children and teens in the lead.**

Weissbourd concluded by saying that this is a particularly "anxious and dark time." He noted that there are many things that divide us, and that "the guardrails of democracy seem to be slipping away." The foremost responsibility for parents is to raise children who are caring, kind and empathetic to others – to those who may live elsewhere or come from different backgrounds.

Following the presentation, Weissbourd responded to a number of questions from the audience.

Click [here](#) for more information about Weissbourd's program *Making Caring Common* and to subscribe to the newsletter. Click [here](#) to learn more about changing college admissions and *Turning the Tide*.