



# PARENT & FACULTY EDUCATION CONFERENCE

## Helping our Children Succeed: A Tune-up for Caring Adults Norm Colb

*Attendee Notes for Menlo School Closing Keynote: Feb. 9, 2013*

Norman Colb has served as Menlo's head of school since 1993. He began his career as a teacher of English in the Brookline (MA) Public Schools, and then as the district's Director of English and Language Arts. He then served in the Newton (MA) Public Schools as the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction. For the ten years before coming to Menlo, he was the Superintendent of Schools in the Mamaroneck (NY) Public Schools.

Norm received a B.A. degree from Brandeis University in 1964 and an M.A.T. degree from Harvard University in 1965. He has served on the boards of several non-profit organizations including the Independent Records Bureau, the California Association of Independent Schools and the Reader's Digest Educational Foundation.

### **On the characteristics we want for our children:**

- Self-confidence
- Resilience
- Ability to set and achieve goals
- Initiative
- A moral center

Having spoken to many parents, Mr. Colb says there is a broad consensus that these are the traits we want for our children. These are the same skills that the world needs in its future citizens. Interestingly, 2-3 decades ago, these were NOT the characteristics that parents wanted for their children; parents wanted obedience, compliance, the ability to take directions and work well for other people.

### **On the parental behaviors which do NOT produce the above traits:**

1. Micromanaging and Overprotecting. Anecdote about a father who wrote a 9 page letter to his son's Stanford professor, which began "I am writing as my son's father and attorney." Overprotection, including overly helping our students with their homework, prevents our students from learning from failure and learning to stand on their own two feet. Article from WSJ about movement to create new playgrounds with an element of risk since the understanding now is that children need to learn to navigate risk and playgrounds are too safe.

2. Overemphasizing grades and college admission. A real problem. Kids are smart; they know that an A is better than a B – they don't need us to tell them that. Yet we often do. The resulting problem is that kids believe that the purpose of going to school is to get good grades. The true purpose of going to school is to learn to use your mind well and realize your full potential. Focusing on grades erodes the sense of what school is for. The New Yorker cartoon: the teacher says to the student: "You got the right answer but you don't get a reward." Extrinsic motivation, such as bribing students for grades leads to superficial, short range learning, extinguishes engagement, and creates an addictive barter economy ("where's my reward?"). On the other hand, when students are intrinsically motivated, genuine learning can take place. The reward should be the learning itself. Discussion of recent cheating scandals at high schools in NY and at Harvard. School systems themselves have been found to cheat in the quest for funding through No Child Left Behind. The New Yorker cartoon: "We have found that by applying just the slightest amount of electric shock we can get higher scores." College students are abusing ADHD medications in larger numbers to get higher scores.
  - a. Musings on why parents press kids for higher grades? Often it is because parents want kids to be admitted into that next (higher) tier of college. Mr. Colb's opinion is that this may not be the best strategy if your goal is for your student to leave university feeling confident and powerful. Presentation of a bell curve of national academic aptitude with our typical Menlo student at around the 75th percentile. If a student is pushed and bribed to get better grades, she may indeed get into that next tier college, but then perhaps be on the lower half of the bell curve for that particular institution, and as a result may feel less than average, and less confident. Whereas, students who attend a slightly less competitive university may be better served, feeling more confident and powerful, launched into the world with great purpose and confidence. Most of our US presidents since FDR came from smaller towns where they were the big fish in a small pond, and most of whom did not attend top tier colleges (and thus had the confidence to reach for the presidency). College "fit" is not just about location/public/private/rural/urban – but will those 4 years of university leave you feeling powerful?
3. Subcontracting parenting to others (schools, media). Mr. Colb's biggest takeaway for parents: "Your kids need you more than ever to be BIG in their lives." Schools can help but cannot replace parents. Media promotes values that are likely not in sync with parents' values (presentation of clips from a current popular TV show, "Two Broke Girls")
4. Worrying. The New Yorker cartoon: house wrapped with caution tape, "Contents under Pressure". Our worrying makes our kids feel more pressure.

**On the parental behaviors which DO produce the desired traits:**

1. Time with parents. Kids have a desperate need for time with parents. In Mr. Colb's over 50 years in education, never has the need for good quality adult attention been greater. Acknowledgment that this is difficult since it's often not easy spending time with teenagers. The New Yorker cartoon: "I blame you for everything. Whose fault is that?" Advice to translate teen eye rolling into "My kids need me." The New Yorker cartoon: "Try and tell me what's bothering you, son. And use your SAT words." What kids need from parents is authentic, patient, loving, unloaded, unworried time.
2. Less worry/more enjoyment of kids. If kids see their parents excessively worry, it makes them worry about themselves. If we are confident in them, we are giving them a gift for a lifetime.

3. Modeling. Anecdote about his now 42 year old son, who credited his own principled nature from an incident when he was a young teen and he saw his father correct the waitress for undercharging him. Kids watch us more than they listen to us.
4. Opportunities to practice self-control. Give kids progressively larger domains over which to control, so they move from being very dependent to self-reliant; that is what college and their vocations will require of them. In college, no one takes attendance, no one reminds them to get up, to eat, to sleep.
5. Opportunities to exercise initiative.

**Final comments**

A disclaimer from Mr. Colb – not a scholar, but have acquired practical wisdom from working with teenagers in education since 1964. Our children deeply need us.

Norm shared one of his favorite poems from the book *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran.