



Competition, Accomplishment, and the Value of High Expectations

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Competition Is Part of Life

Competition has always been part of education, just as it is part of life. Students compete for grades, scholarships, recognition, college admission, jobs, promotions, and opportunities. Pretending that competition does not exist does young people no favors. The better educational goal is to teach students how to compete productively—against meaningful standards, against their own previous performance, and sometimes against equally motivated peers.

Healthy competition can push people beyond complacency. It establishes a benchmark and gives accomplishment meaning. A difficult examination passed, a demanding project completed, a position earned, or a skill mastered carries satisfaction precisely because success required effort. Achievement means less when expectations are continually lowered merely to ensure that everyone experiences the same result.

Competition and Cooperation Can Coexist

That does not mean education should become an endless contest of winners and losers. Research offers a more useful middle ground. OECD studies have found benefits associated with both cooperation and competition. Students who describe their schools as cooperative tend to perform well academically and report a stronger sense of belonging, while students who are personally comfortable with competition can also respond to it with greater motivation and achievement.

Competition can add excitement and incentive, but excessive competition can also increase fear of failure. The lesson is not to eliminate competition but to use it intelligently.

Teamwork Requires Individual Responsibility

The same principle applies to teamwork. Cooperation works best when every member is expected to contribute. A successful group should not provide shelter for someone who does little while stronger students carry the load. Good teamwork combines a common objective with individual responsibility. Each student contributes something measurable, learns from others, and understands that the group's success depends upon the effort of its members.

That is also how much of adult life works. A good workplace requires cooperation, but employees are still evaluated on competence, reliability, initiative, and results. Colleagues may help one another improve while at the same time competing for advancement or recognition. Those ideas are not contradictory. In fact, some of the healthiest competition occurs among people who respect one another's abilities and raise one another's standards.

High Expectations Give Achievement Meaning

Schools therefore should not be embarrassed by high expectations or by recognizing genuine accomplishment. There is an important difference between encouraging a student and pretending that every performance is equally good. Students deserve encouragement when they struggle, another opportunity when they fail, and help when they need it. But they also deserve honest standards that allow them to know when they have genuinely succeeded.

Learning from Failure

Failure has a role in that process as well. It should neither be celebrated nor treated as catastrophe. A disappointing grade, a lost competition, or an unsuccessful attempt can identify what needs improvement. Learning how to respond to failure—with additional effort, better preparation, and greater persistence—is itself part of becoming an educated and capable adult.

Raising the Bar for Everyone

The best educational environment, then, is neither ruthlessly competitive nor artificially insulated from competition. It combines **high standards, cooperation, individual accountability, and the opportunity to earn a genuine sense of accomplishment**. Students should learn not only how to compete successfully but also how to help classmates become stronger competitors themselves.

That may be one of education's most valuable lessons: achievement is satisfying when it is earned, and success becomes more worthwhile when it helps raise the performance of the people around us.