

The Role of Competition at West

Roger Avedon, December 2013

The price which society pays for the law of competition, like the price it pays for cheap comforts and luxuries, is great; but the advantages of this law are also greater still than its cost -- for it is to this law that we owe our wonderful material development, which brings improved conditions in its train. But, whether the law be benign or not, we must say of it: It is here; we cannot evade it; no substitutes for it have been found; and while the law may be sometimes hard for the individual, it is best for the race, because it ensures the survival of the fittest in every department.

Andrew Carnegie

After the game the king and pawn go into the same box,

Italian Proverb

If competition is inevitable, often necessary and frequently valuable, how best to prepare the child for that inevitability? When is it appropriate to shelter children from competition? To encourage them to pursue it? To teach them to respect fairness and the rules? To make conscious choices to bend or even break the rules in order to triumph?

This brief outline is a bit of a primer on competition, various facets of competition, as they pertain to elementary school in general, the Hillsborough community in particular, and West in specific.

Official versus Unofficial Competition

Official competitions are sanctioned, monitored, refereed and publicized explicitly. Unofficial competitions are unsanctioned (and may be illicit), unmonitored (except perhaps by participants and interested spectators) and are informally publicized. In general, official competitions tend to be voluntary whereas unofficial competitions need not be. And, of course, there can be gradations between these two poles.

There are not many official competitions at West. This year, the school is treating student council elections more clearly as official competition. Athletics has many of the attributes of official competition, although not all. **Should there be more official competitions at West, and in what areas?**

Student performance in mathematics is often seems to be a form of unofficial competition in affluent communities in modern America. Anecdotally, many West students receive some form of formal math assistance or enrichment outside of school, such as Kumon, Mathnasium. Anyone who has assisted with Speedy Math in first grade as a parent is acutely aware that the many children view Speedy Math as a high pressure unofficial competition. Some thrive in this environment and some have a very negative experience. **Would official competitions in areas other than mathematics (or STEM) reduce or increase**

pressure on students to compete in mathematics at West?

Does the ambiguity around Mathletics as an official competition benefit students or not, and if so, how?

Grades have always been an unofficial (and eventually official) form of academic competition. Anecdotally, some West teachers even get push back from parents about their children's report card grades even in the earliest academic grades. **Does the HCSD grading framework promote or mitigate such competition?**

Social status or standing is also an unofficial competition that most people are aware of, some participate in willingly, some unwillingly and some avoid. **Is social competition a concern at West? Does the nature of the Hillsborough community aggravate or mitigate such issues? Does the character of the West community or West school compared to North or South change things? How?**

Intentional vs. Unintentional Competition

A somewhat related concept is intentional versus unintentional competition. An official competition is clearly intentional: the organizers, the participants and the spectators are all supposed to recognize and understand the nature of the competition, the rules, who is participating, and how success or failure will be determined.

Unofficial competition can be either intentional or unintentional, and, perhaps of greater interest in an elementary school setting, different individuals can interpret unofficial competition differently in terms of the nature of the competition, the rules, who is participating, and how success or failure will be determined.

Some of the at-home project work in the junior grades has historically had some of this character, notably the mammal and dinosaur figures in first and second grade, respectively, have bifurcated between those completed largely by students and those that are clearly not the work of young children.

What unintentional competitions exist at West? Are they beneficial or not, and why?

Perhaps a more contentious area of unofficial, unintentional competition is academic [*redshirting*](#), "the practice of postponing entrance into kindergarten of age-eligible children in order to allow extra time for socioemotional, intellectual, or physical growth." Anecdotally, close to one third of male students in some grades at West are academic redshirts. **Is redshirting a problem and, if so, how?**

Outward (Public) versus Inward (Personal) Competition

For the individual in any competition, the competitive instinct can be outwardly focused toward defeating or superseding other competitors or inwardly focused toward personal achievement and improving performance over time. **What forms of inward competition exist as West? Is it encouraged or discouraged? Is that positive or negative?**

Zero Sum (Pure) Competition versus Positive Sum Competition or Cooperation

A zero sum game is an idea from the mathematical study of games and refers to any competition where there is a direct trade-off between the success of one competitor versus all the others. For example, soccer and chess are zero sum games, so scoring a goal in soccer or taking a piece in chess helps one side in direct proportion to how much it harms the other. This is sometimes colloquially called Winner Take All in modern American, and there is much public hand-wringing in the press about how the changing nature of society, particularly, globalization, promotes this type of competition. Here's an interesting related quote that is germane to education:

Moderate giftedness has been made worthless by the printing press and radio and television and satellites and all that. A moderately gifted person who would have been a community treasure a thousand years ago has to give up, has to go into some other line of work, since modern communications put him or her into daily competition with nothing but the world's champions.

Kurt Vonnegut

Outside of official competitions, and sometimes not even then, almost no competition is purely zero sum. In the business world, for example, firms that compete for business must restrain some competitive practices lest they undermine customer confidence in the industry as a whole. Car companies never disparage the safety or reliability of their competitor's offerings.

Are there competitive circumstances at West that have a zero sum character? Are there competitive circumstances at West that are *perceived* to have such a character?

Sportsmanship versus Gamesmanship and Cheating

Finally, sportsmanship is the highlighting and promotion of [fairness](#), [ethics](#), [respect](#), and a sense of [fellowship](#) with one's competitors in a competition whereas [gamesmanship](#) is the violation of sportsmanship to gain a competitive advantage without actually breaking the

rules of an official competition.

Gamesmanship is a very grey area in unofficial or unintentional competitions. In affluent communities like Hillsborough, where many families have enormous resources to devote to their children, it can be difficult to resist putting such resources into play to make one's children more competitive. For example, private coaching is endemic in popular Hillsborough sport leagues such as Little League and AYSO.

Is gamesmanship on behalf of one's children inappropriate or not, and how?

[Cheating](#) is perceived to be rampant in today's high schools. Of greatest concern to West, cheating used to be thought of as something that weaker students used to make up for their lack of ability to compete academically but is now thought to be most prevalent among [high performing students](#) who are under intense pressure to reach the next rung of the educational ladder.

When is cheating appropriate?

How should one address the necessity of gamesmanship and cheating with the desire to teach sportsmanship to children?

And one final quote:

*We're constantly judging and grading other parents, just to make sure that they aren't any better than us. I'm as guilty as anyone. I see some lady hand her kid a Nintendo DS at the supermarket and I instantly downgrade that lady to Sh***y Parent status. I feel pressure to live up to a parental ideal that no one probably has ever achieved. I feel pressure to raise a group of human beings that will help America kick the sh*t out of Finland and South Korea in the world math rankings. I feel pressure to shield my kids from the trillion pages of hentai donkey porn out there on the Internet. I feel pressure to make the insane amounts of money needed for a supposedly 'middle-class' upbringing for the kids, an upbringing that includes a house and college tuition and health care and so many other expenses that you have to be a multimillionaire to afford it. PRESSURE PRESSURE PRESSURE.*

Drew Magary

Someone Could Get Hurt: A Memoir of Twenty-First-Century Parenthood