

Academic Competition - No

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Academic competition recognizes students for achieving certain goals or certain heights of learning. It is supposed to be a motivational factor for a student. It usually “puts everyone in the same boat” with no handicaps for ability as in golf or bowling. Because of that I think that academic competition can be more harmful than good. It can be the cause of students having the wrong concept of what makes studies worthwhile and successful.

With academic competition you must have a winner and a loser, otherwise you wouldn’t call it “competition.” Too often we give the laurels to the winners and not much to the losers. Don’t we then give the impression that winning counts more than losing? Isn’t the winning student viewed as more valuable than the losing student?

The problem with all of this is that God doesn’t reward us on the basis of how we compare to others. He rewards us based on what we’ve done with what He has given. So why should we reward students differently? We tend to base our awards solely on

what students accomplish instead of on what they have been given to work with and then manage to accomplish. One example of this would be the honor roll. Only those with the highest grades are given this honor. What about the student with limited ability who works as hard as he can and receives C’s? Sorry, you are not “honored.” We issue a very loud statement that says you have accomplished more if you have B’s and A’s. It is good that you have tried and thus have C’s, but you’re not publicly recognized. It is obviously not as much of an accomplishment.

When we demand the same high level of achievement, from all students, in order to be recognized, we’re telling them that the achievement is what counts — not the getting there. We are threatening the intrinsic satisfaction of knowing you’ve done your best. Self-competition we definitely need. But academic competition which includes all students — is that proper?

Would it be fair to ask an experienced carpenter and an electrician each to build a china cabinet, and then award the experienced

carpenter for building a superior cabinet? That is what we do with some types of academic competition. We are forcing all students to compete in areas in which some of them are simply not going to succeed. They are not working with the same abilities or tools. Is such competition going to motivate anyone? Instead we must work with each child to set his own goals. Then we will have students that achieve. Students who achieve are students who see their studies as worthwhile. They will actually enjoy school. Then students will recognize that God has given differing abilities, and success comes when we have used that ability to its fullest.

That's the idea that I want in the classroom. I don't want the idea that only high marks and only college bound students are noteworthy. Let's not force all students to compete with one another. We would never force an uncoordinated child to play interscholastic sports. Why do we force students into feeling the pressure of academic competition? Satisfaction, success, and motivation in academics may be found in competition, but let's be careful how we use it.

A number of practical suggestions can be made with respect to teaching that builds up all the students and avoids improper academic competition.

In the first place, we must

create a classroom environment where every child feels valuable for who he is, a precious covenant child with important gifts that must be developed, rather than for his accomplishment in academic scores. A teacher can do this by making positive comments on a regular basis to all of the students. So often we fall into the trap of creating a negative classroom environment. Though control must be maintained we do great harm to those students whom we frequently criticize for their misbehavior or lack of accomplishments. A public comment of appreciation would do much to bolster the student who is struggling.

In the second place, we should do things in class in which a student who is not academically talented can do well and feel good about. Once we get to know the students we should seek out ways to make all of the students feel like valuable, contributing members of the classroom. Even if a child's "claim to fame" is that he has supplied the class with some raw material for an art project, he feels as if he has an important place in the classroom.

Another suggestion is that we must be careful that the review games we use in the classroom build up all the students rather than only a few "winners." One sad event that is frequently repeated is that the children choose

I am reminded of a "road race" game I once used to motivate children to read. Tags were

placed in a row around the room to represent the number of pages the students read. From a motivation point of view many students really read a lot of books in order to stay in the race. However, there were a few poor readers who had to come into class every day and be humiliated that they had hardly left the starting line. In hindsight, perhaps I could have changed the race to a voluntary event or even somehow represented improvement rather than accomplishment.

All the children entrusted to our care are important in God's sight. We do well to convey that truth in our classroom.

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Having just received the Spring 1988 issue of *Perspectives*, I take this opportunity to express my wife's and my appreciation for

this fine magazine. There is good material for Marilyn as a teacher and for both of us as parents. The articles are instructive, stimulating, and interesting.

May God give you and your staff grace to continue this important work on behalf of the cause of Protestant Reformed covenant education.

Cordially in Christ,
Prof. Robert D. Decker