



October 25, 2010

On October 4, 2010, **Schools for Children**, sponsored a special screening for the Greater Boston area of [Race to Nowhere](#), a remarkable documentary film about the pressures faced by American students and their teachers in our achievement-driven public and private education system and culture. Over 400 parents, students, educators and other professionals attended the screening and the subsequent discussion led by authors and educators Richard Weissbourd and Alfie Kohn.

Race to Nowhere is a call to mobilize families, educators and policy makers to challenge current assumptions on how to best prepare the youth of America to become healthy, bright, contributing and leading citizens. The goal of healthy, contributing citizens is also our goal as educators. Our mission at Schools for Children is to create and support great schools and educational services. We are proud to have hosted the first Boston-area screening of this important film because our organization cares deeply about what is going on with children and young people in our schools.

At **Schools for Children**, we are committed to helping schools respond to children as individuals—that's what we believe makes a school great. In our schools, we serve both 'typical learners' ([Lesley Ellis School](#)) and those with special learning needs ([Dearborn Academy](#) and [Seaport Academy](#)).

In all of our schools, we listen to our students in generating our curricular themes. At Seaport Academy, we work with students individually to design a path for success. Our Seaport Institutes offer intensive, week-long courses on specific topics that reflect student interests and teacher passions. Students also pursue independent research projects.

At Lesley Ellis School, we design learning activities that integrate math, science and language arts creating dynamic learning throughout the day and focusing on children's developmental needs. Standardizes tests are used only to introduce our older elementary students to what they might find all too common in their 'next school.' Instead of test scores, quarterly reports at Lesley Ellis School offer lengthy narrative descriptions paired with some indication of where the student stands on key developmental tasks. They are designed to give parents a very clear picture of the kind of progress being made in all subject areas, but not designed to invite comparisons with classmates or group standards.

At Dearborn Academy, all of our students have distinctly individualized educational plans highlighting strengths and weaknesses and setting personal goals for achievement. Strong arts, shop and physical education programs provide opportunities for self expression. In all of our schools, we believe that the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to learning greatly diminishes the unique gifts of our children.

Our goal is to encourage all schools to create room for *every* student to be heard, to provide space to listen to what each student genuinely needs to move forward, and to give time and expertise to teach students in effective—and joyful—ways. It is our belief that the messages contained in the "Race to Nowhere" must be discussed if we are to strike the right balance for our young people. The messages—the demands of homework, the pressures of testing, the narrow cultural definition of what it means to

succeed—are as germane to families of students who are just starting out as they are with students in their high school years. They speak to families of strong students who get caught up in the competition to ‘be the best’; they speak to families of students who have fallen off the pace or who struggle to simply find a place that understands their passions and skills.

Our country is rightly concerned about the quality of education provided to our young people. The problem is that State-administered tests and the emerging National Core Curriculum ([Race to the Top](#)) seem designed to ensure that all children reach minimum standards. A focus on specific outcomes sometimes push schools to teach as if all children learn exactly the same way—even though we know they don't. At the same time, schools across the country are working hard to become better, stronger, and more responsive— often with fewer resources. Applying the standards reflected under [No Child Left Behind](#) leaves educators frustrated with media headlines citing their failure to meet annual targets. (A recent headline in the Boston Globe (9/19/10 offers an example when it states: “Two-thirds of area schools fail federal progress standards.”) For schools, trying to ‘measure up’ often means trying to do much more with less. It would be an easier task if all children had exactly the same abilities and needs—but they don't.

The fact is that learning is never simple and learning is never the same for everyone. Learning is complicated, messy, confusing, and not as easy as it sometimes seems. Research tells us that while there are predictable milestones to human development and general patterns of learning, individual learning differences are often dramatic and differences in interest, in enthusiasm and personality can also be profound. Learning, it turns out, is as individual as we are as people.

Educating children as individuals is harder and often more expensive than teaching children as if they were all the same. As schools grapple with cuts, political pressures and economic challenges, opportunities for learning to be complex and individualized are reduced. At the same time, pressures to achieve are ratcheted up and our students bear the brunt of that pressure to achieve. Our mission is to help schools preserve and enhance what it takes to be great and to create new programs that respect children as individuals. We applaud the producers of **Race to Nowhere** for reigniting the national discussion on what truly makes schools great and what truly inspires children to retain their passion for learning. We look forward to finding ways to use this film to bring that dialogue into classrooms, schools and communities.