

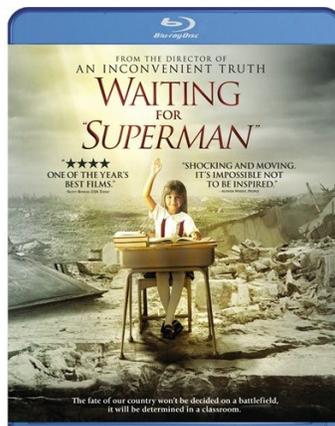
# END THE RACE TO NOWHERE



## Fix the School, Not the Child

20 Ideas for Parents Who Are  
Sick of Waiting for Superman  
And  
Tired of Having Their Children in A Race to Nowhere

It's time to  
**STOP**



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I was disheartened following a recent conversation with a teacher who was doing amazing work with her students whose passions she was tapping into. They were reading, writing, and passionately presenting about topics of deep personal interest. I was inspired and impressed at how this teacher joyously engaged learners who were proud and excited about their learning. As I was leaving the building the teacher stopped me and confided, "You know come next month, this goes out the window and all we'll be able to do for the rest of the year is worksheets and test prep." She said, "It's so depressing when you know you can help kids get excited about learning, but you're forced to put that aside to teach to the test. You see the excitement and love of learning drain right from them and right from me." "Today was wonderful," she said, "but it just makes me more depressed when I think about what I'm going to have to do to these kids and I don't know how much longer I can do this for a living."

It reminded me of what New York City teacher John Taylor Gatto must have felt when he submitted his resignation letter saying, "[I'm no longer willing to hurt children.](#)" I suggested, maybe she engage in subversive teaching and continue to tap into her students passions. "No," she explained. "We can't. You see they do drive by test prep worksheet collection and if we don't produce, we can get written up."

This teacher shares the frustration parents everywhere feel. As a recent film explains, school often feels as if kids are on a [RACE TO NOWHERE](#). The movie does an excellent job of explaining the detriment of the high-stakes, high-pressure culture that has invaded our schools and our children's lives. Vicki Abeles, a concerned mother turned filmmaker shares how her three children each in some way fell victim to school-induced stress. The problem was so severe that in addition to mental anguish, her children experienced headaches, stomachaches, and depression that resulted in trips to the doctor's office, therapist, and hospital. She dedicated the film to a beautiful young girl and gifted musician from her neighborhood named Devon who at 13 committed suicide. The suspected cause of death was that the pressure to succeed at school in general, algebra in particular, became extremely challenging causing self-doubt, depression, loss of self worth, anxiety, and ultimately death.

The movie ends with parents and students who have the problem clearly identified, and they know things need to change, but they don't have concrete solutions in mind. Like the frustrated teacher whose experience I shared whose hands are tied if she wants to keep her job, parents and students are feeling equally frustrated. The difference is though, as a parent, there are indeed ways you can set your child free and quit the [Race to Nowhere](#).

**Here are 20 Ideas for Parents Sick of Waiting for Superman and Tired of Having Their Children Race to Nowhere.** Following each idea is an explanation.

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**Idea 1 - Don't subject your children to the standardized tests.**

The anxiety-inducing standardized tests are not for your children. They are for the politicians and the huge for-profit business of test-making companies (who by the way are the ones who were the first [developers of the new Common Core Standards](#)). You and your child can easily find out how they would do on the standardized test on your own if you are so inclined as there is limitless practice tests. On the day of the test let your child simply write "[I prefer not to take your test](#)" across the top of the test. The end. Fight for your right not to put your child through the stress and to give him/her more relevant and meaningful work leading up to the test, which leads me to...

**Idea 2 - Take ownership of your child's learning**

I was upset recently when a passionate mom who is also an educational administrator shared on Facebook that she was frustrated that her child couldn't participate in a reading program at her school because the **administration(????)** decided which

students should be able to be a part of the program. This mom knows her daughter and felt this program would be the best option for her daughter's success. There were several "ah shucks" type comments on the post with the sentiment that it was too bad her daughter's class wasn't selected. I say, WTF??? This is your child and you know what is best. Parents have the right to demand their child receive the best opportunities possible. Don't schools always boast about how they differentiate instruction? Well they need to back up their philosophies. If a parent thinks their child should be in a different class for a particular subject, the default answer should NOT BE NO!

Whether you want your child to have a particular learning opportunity or you don't want your child subjected to meaningless test prep, parents can push schools to stop with the one-size-fits all learning and become partners at tailoring learning to children as individuals. While all the other kids are doing test prep or engaging in a course of study you know is less than ideal for your child, explain to the school that you want your child participating in a learning activity more tailored to his/her needs.

When I discussed this idea with my partner, he said, if every parent got so deeply involved in school, it would be mayhem. You can't have all the kids in the school just sitting around doing what is best for them. I smiled, oh really? That would be mayhem? The anxiety, depression, and [anesthetizing of our youth is better?](#) I think he got it, but the idea of taking ownership of your child's learning is so foreign to most parents, they have no idea where to begin. So why not start with..

### **Idea 3 - Kids and Parents Can Design Their Own Learning**

My partner is right to a certain extent. If a teacher had to come up with an individual learning plan for every student for every subject, it might seem overwhelming. But what if we didn't require teachers to own the learning and instead...

Let students and parents own the learning.

While the rest of the kids are doing test prep or following a curriculum you know does not meet your child's needs, or if the teacher is teaching material, you know your child already knows, talk to the school about either allowing your child to work on his own work at his desk, in the library, or another agreed upon area.

If you're with me to this point, you are probably thinking while this sounds good, how can my child and I really design the learning. When you think about it, it's not all that hard. Today, you can learn most anything you want right from YouTube and Google. Now all you need is a plan for the learning. There are lots of resources out there on planning lessons and units and they shouldn't just be the teachers domain. **After all,**

**isn't the idea of school in part to create independent learners?** There are many clear and simple guides you can follow. You can go ahead and get started on [designing your own learning with resources like these](#).

If you're starting to buy into the idea that you and your child (not the school) own the learning, you may be wondering, how to respond if the school refuses to allow your child to do what is best for him or her. Dig. What is their fear? Sometimes when they actually express it, they realize it doesn't make sense.

**If you want your child participating in a program or curriculum different from his/her classmates...**

Explain where you want your child and why it is best for him/her. They might say, "What if every child were to want to have the choice about what curriculum or program is best? Answer: That would be great! Why wouldn't we let them choose what best matches their interests and learning style. They could say, "We can't let children and parents decide what's best for them? Answer: Why not? Parents can and should unit to allow themselves and their children to have more of a say in their education.

**If you don't want your child involved in the test prep mania that goes on in many schools for several months...**

You might explain to the teacher/school that you know test prep is not best for your child and you know the results are [flawed in many ways](#) especially when it comes to measuring the achievement of the 21st century student. You can also explain that your child [don't need no stinkin test to know what s/he knows](#) or does not know.

Instead of having your child engage in the [ADD/ADHD inducing drudgery of test prep](#), how about using this time to let your child explore his/her passions. After all, shouldn't that have some place in the school? Here's how and why to make time for passion-driven learning.

**Idea 4 - Demand The Ability to Pursue Passion Driven Learning**

From a learning perspective, the most important role of a parent is to help your children become independent learners, discovering, exploring, and developing their passions. Sadly, this is all too often neglected in schools. Children who are talented musicians, dancers, artists, sculptures, filmmakers, broadcasters, animators, set designers, builders, photographers, dare devils, chefs, etc. etc. etc. are dismissed. These talents are left unmeasured and undervalued. If we don't give children a time to discover and develop their passions it becomes difficult to connect what they're learning with why it is important. Parents can talk to teachers and school leaders about the importance of recognizing that they are teaching children, not subjects. Parents can help their

children discover and explore his/her passion. Parents can DEMAND that teachers allow students to modify their assignments so that the work is meaningful and connected to their passions. Parents can show school leaders and teachers that there are schools like [The Island School](#) and the [iSchool](#) who are doing this work that perhaps they can learn from. You can show them a [vision of what students who attend these schools look like](#) too.

I was disappointed last year when my partner's son had to do a history project. The teacher gave students a choice in what they wanted to study. Yay! His son, who loves skateboarding, said he wanted to study the history of the sport. The teacher said, "That's not history. You can write about the Harlem Renaissance." Boo! My boyfriend didn't feel empowered to demand what was best for his child. His child did the bare minimum to get by turning in a paper that had no audience about a subject which didn't have much meaning to him.

If your child has time in the day that could be better spent exploring his passions, let the school know you'd like your child to be given this opportunity and share the learning plan you and your child have developed for that time. If you're wondering where you might be able to find resources for your child to explore and develop his or her passions, consider online educational resources or OER.

### **Idea 5 - Learn without place or time restrictions**

With online education and the [Online Education Resources movement](#) there are many more options for students to engage in learning that meets their needs, interests, and abilities. I was recently in communication with a woman whose son was only 9 when schools gave up on him. "They", the experts, planned to put him in a special education class saying he had a severe learning deficit and would never learn to read. The system wanted to give up on him and he was only nine. This mother helped her child follow his passions which eventually led him to taking online classes including MIT's free courses. When I asked if he could learn without a teacher or classmates, she said, "ABSOLUTELY." He's passionate about this work and driven to learn. When given the space to learn outside of school her son covered Math from Pre Algebra to Pre Calculus in 19 months. He developed a hobby in Astronomy. He taught himself Chemistry and Physics. Now, 10 years after the school system has decided he was unteachable, he is taking university online courses, hoping to complete his degree and work as a Geologist.

This mother shared, "I thought that 'I' had discovered a new way of learning, that my kid was unique and special because he did not need a teacher. Then someone told me that we were "unschoolers" and I found a great discussion group. There, I learned that

kids are naturally curious, that my son was not unique, and I gained the confidence to let him continue to follow his passions, and he has had MANY. I was only along for the ride and to open a few doors, when he asked for direction and I could not help.”

This mother figured out a way that worked best for her son. For other children, a blended option of time inside school and at home might work better. For others it might be to allow their child time during a particular class to work independently in the library because s/he can learn better that way. Another option for high school age students is to let your children start taking college courses.

### **Idea 6 - Forget the Pressure of AP or IB. Let Your Kids Take College Courses**

When I was in high school, I thought I was so clever. While other kids were sweating it in AP and IB courses, [I actually just took college classes](#). It was great to be around others who took subjects of interest seriously and also to connect with students of other ages. Being only 15 and very petite, I was nervous I would feel uncomfortable or stand out. Not so. It was all about the learning and connecting. It was fun to be taken seriously and fit in with college students. It also was not extremely stressful like the experience of my peers taking the AP and IB classes.

Back then there weren't classes available online, but I've learned that today it's not unusual for homeschoolers and unschoolers start taking online college courses in their early teen years. For students going to traditional school, why not arrange for your child to have time to use an internet enabled computer to engage in advanced studies online in his/her area of interest? Or find out if there are programs where you live like [College Now](#) in New York City which allows high school students to take classes at city colleges at no cost.

While starting college in high school is a great option for the academically-minded student, there are many students who have different passions, interests, and paths that might be of interest. Fortunately, [at some schools they provide opportunities for students to focus on such areas of interest](#) and develop expertise in such areas. If your school doesn't have such an option, why not create one?

### **Idea 7 - Create Your Own Apprenticeship Program for Credit**

Find out your schools requirement for elective credit and work with your child to complete a learning plan that results in achievement of learning goals and credit. Depending on what works best for you and your child, this might mean engaging in an apprenticeship face-to-face, virtually, or a combination of the two. For instance your child might be interested in politics and want to work on a political campaign. Their

contributions could involve going to the office, or it could involve something that could be done remotely such as how the Obama campaign who had volunteers supporting his social media campaign work. Your child might find a blog, newspaper, or magazine that will accept him or her as an apprentice. The same holds true. This could involve all face-to-face time or could be done remotely, even on school premises. Maybe your child wants to take up a project of beautifying the school yard and perhaps even get others involved. Create a learning plan and submit a proposal to the school.

### **Idea 8 - Demand You Child Be Able to Use the Tools They Need to Learn in School**

To this point, I've mentioned online resources a lot and you may be thinking, my kids school doesn't have computers or internet for this. There are many educational leaders who believe access to the tools that best meet students needs is a right, not a privilege. All you need to find is one ethernet drop in a school and plug in an ethernet splitter so your child can connect a laptop. If your child has their own laptop, that's ideal. If not a netbook can be purchased for less than \$500 or see if the school has a device that can be used for students who need them to access learning. Another option is craigslist. There are a lot of folks upgrading that would be happy to donate a device. When I was a library media specialist I approached companies to find if any were upgrading. I got an entire lab donated that way. Finally, a writer friend of mine recently acquired a laptop by asking her personal learning network if anyone had a device they weren't using. In the 21st century acquiring tech is easy and so is buying an ethernet splitter. Don't let an outdated school used to doing things the old fashioned way keep your child stuck in the past.

### **Idea 9 - Don't underestimate the importance of sleep. Skip first period.**

What if the problem isn't that your child doesn't like what s/he is learning, but it's actually that they're too tired to learn. In the over-scheduled lives of kids today, this is not uncommon. At many schools, it is the bus schedule or asbestos removal schedule rather than providing the best learning environment that dictates students arrival time to school.

As I think of myself as a high school student required to enter school as early as 7:00 a.m. in the morning it's no surprise that I was drinking coffee and popping NO DOZE all day long? For today's students it's energy drinks and more and more often ADHD meds that keep them awake and help them focus. For many teens this seems a normal part of getting through the day. It's not! School age children should be getting at least 9 hours sleep a day. Is it any wonder that students indicate their number one reason for liking [learning online](#) is that they get to sleep in?

So what can a parent do? See if you can get the work for your child's first class and allow him to do it at home when necessary. Explain that early starts are negatively affecting your child's health. Get a doctor's note and let him do the work on his own time. You are the parent. This is your child. Demand what you know is right for your kid.

**But what if traditional school is just not right for your child? There are options for parents ready to "Think Outside The Traditional School."**

### **Idea 10 - Find a School That is Right for Your Child**

If your child is at a school that doesn't honor his or her unique learning style, passions, talents and interests, you might consider an alternative to a traditional school that fits more in line with your child's needs. Some of these schools are public schools, others are non public schools. If you find a non public school is a better option, you might be able to have your child's education funded in part through your insurance company if s/he suffers from stress, anxiety, or ADD/ADHD. Additionally, there is often financial add for families that qualify. There are several popular options. Below are three in which you might be interested.

- The Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) provides enriched learning experiences and higher learning standards for all children through three goals; developing talents in all children, providing a broad range of advanced-level enrichment experiences for all students, and providing advanced follow-up opportunities for young people based on their strengths and interests. The SEM focuses on enrichment for all students through high levels of engagement and the use of enjoyable and challenging learning experiences that are constructed around students' interests, learning styles, and preferred modes of expression.
- There are democratic schools also sometimes referred to as "free schools," "democracy schools" or schools that follow the "Sudbury" or "Summerhill" model. These schools provide students with a [democratic education](#) which is a theory of learning and school governance in which students and staff participate freely and equally in a school democracy. In a democratic school, there is typically shared decision-making among students and staff on matters concerning living, working, and learning together. At such schools students individually decide what to do with their time, and learn as a by-product of ordinary experience rather than through classes or a standard curriculum. Students are given complete responsibility for their own education and the school is run by a [direct democracy](#) in which students and staff have an equal vote.(Wikipedia).

- Big Picture Learning schools have a mission to lead vital changes in education, both in the United States and internationally, by generating and sustaining innovative, personalized schools that work in tandem with the real world of the greater community. They believe that in order to sustain successful schools where authentic and relevant learning takes place, we must continually innovate techniques and test learning tools to make our schools better and more rigorous. They believe that in order to create and influence the schools of the future, we must use the lessons learned through our practice and research to give us added leverage to impact changes in public policy.

You can find out more about these schools and where they are located [here](#).

Perhaps there's just not one of these schools in your area but you wish there were. If that's the case, why not consider starting, or finding others to start, a school in your area?

### **Idea 11 - Start a School**

This might sound a little far-fetched, but after talking to people who've done this, I've learned it might make more sense than you might think. Perhaps your a good organizer and/or are well connected. Start spreading the word and see if you can find other families who children are looking for alternatives. If you have a class or two full of students, it could just be a matter of putting the pieces in place. You don't have to lead the school if this is not your area. Talk to teachers or school leaders who might be interested in opening their dream school. Help motivate, inspire and connect. There are many resources out there to help you get started. Below are some of them.

- [Starting a Private School](#)
- [Starting a Charter School](#)
- [Starting a Free, Democracy or Alternative School](#)

Okay, maybe starting a school is more than you're ready to take on, there's not an alternative school that works for you, and you've found that schooling is just not the right fit for your child. It might be time to **consider what unschooler Kate Bering calls, "Thinking Outside the School."** While school is compulsory, that doesn't necessarily mean children have to "go to school." There are other options aside from dropping out that can work well for students when going to school does not.

### **Idea 12 - Pursue a GED**

Don't be fooled. Your child doesn't NEED a high school diploma for opportunities to be available to him or her. Instead consider a GED (general education development). If a school setting isn't right for your child, this is one practical option and there are plenty of ways to prepare to pass the GED too. Here are a couple.

- [How to get a GED: a Step-by-Step Process to Earn a GED](#)
- [GED Online: Online Resources for Earning a GED](#)

With my GED suggestion, you may be concerned that your child will have limited career options with a GED. Not true. Think first about the type of career your child might want to pursue and what it would require. For many careers a trade school, internship, or apprenticeship will get your child on their way to becoming prepared or at least exploring what they are interested in.

### **Idea 13 - Learning Online**

Did you know that your child could attend school online from kindergarten to 12th grade at schools like [Branson online](#)? For many children this is a great option. In fact students who have selected this option are happy to articulate the reasons they [prefer to learn online](#). It might come as no surprise that at the top of the list is that it allows them to get enough sleep. The ability to pursue passions also tops the list. [The International Association of K-12 Online Learning](#) is the organization that does [advocacy](#), [research](#), [professional development](#), and [networking](#) to promote the sharing of information, resources and expertise across the larger education reform community to drive future directions in K-12 online education. Their reports provide useful information for those interested in finding out more about learning online. The [introduction to online learning](#) is a good report to start with. [The National Primer on K-12 Online Learning](#) provides a comprehensive overview of online learning by examining the basics about online teaching and learning, evaluating academic success, professional development, technology and other topics. Here is a [state-by-state update of progress](#).

### **Idea 14- Homeschooling**

As frustration and dissatisfaction with compulsory schooling rises so it seems does the popularity of home schooling. As the name implies, these children follow a curriculum at home usually lead by the child's family or tutors. Because so much time in school consists of being shuffled from place to place and waiting, it is generally believed that students schooled at home can complete a day's work in a much shorter length of time. Movements like online educational resources and the popularity of online learning make learning materials easy to access.

## Idea 15 - Unschooling / Natural Learning

Idzie Desmarais an unschooled adult who blogs at [I'm Unschooled. Yes, I can write.](#) explains unschooling this way.

**Version #1:** Unschooling (usually considered a type of homeschooling) is student directed learning, which means the child or teen learns whatever they want, whenever they want. Learning is entirely interest driven, not dictated or directed by an external curriculum, by teachers, or by parents. For an unschooler, life is their classroom.

**Version #2:** Unschooling requires a paradigm shift, one in which you must stop looking at the world as a series of occurrences/resources/experiences etc. that can be learned from, and a series that can't. The world doesn't divide neatly into different subjects, and you can't tell right from the outset what a seemingly unimportant question, interest, or TV show obsession will lead to. I learn from: wandering, wondering, listening, reading, watching, discussing, running, writing, daydreaming, searching, researching, meditating, hibernating, playing, creating, growing, doing, helping, and everything else that comprises the day to day happenings of my life.

**Version #3:** Unschooling, at its heart, is nothing more complicated or simple than ***the realization that life and learning are not two separate things.*** And when you realize that living and learning are inseparable, it all starts to truly make sense

## Idea 16 - Co-oping and Caregivers

If you're thinking online, home and unschooling sound great for someone who could devote full-time attention to this, but that's not you, consider that for parents who can't devote this much time, there are other options. One, is hiring a caregiver who is matched to your needs. Another is forming a co-op where the parents/care givers share responsibility. As they reach their teenage years, the caregiver/co-op option often is no longer necessary as students become able to care for themselves.

## Idea 17 - You Don't Have to Go to School to Get Into College

As children of many parents continue on their [RACE TO NOWHERE](#) treadmills in high school, a secret many are unaware of is that you don't have to go to school to get into college. I don't just mean community college. I mean a very good college. In fact, I don't just mean a very good college, I mean the best colleges. In fact as the [Learn in Freedom](#) website explains, "Harvard College specifically mentions that they have never required a high school diploma for admission. Stanford University makes clear in a form letter to homeschooled applicants that a high school diploma is not necessary for admission. More and more colleges are following their lead and mentioning admission

policies for homeschoolers on-line or in printed materials.” Wikipedia reveals that homeschoolers have now matriculated at over 900 different colleges and universities, including institutions with highly selective standards of admission such as the US military academies, [Rice University](#), [Harvard University](#), [Stanford University](#), [Cornell University](#), [Brown University](#), [Dartmouth College](#), and [Princeton University](#). [19]. The Learning in Freedom site provides a list of colleges that will admit students who haven’t attended school [here](#).

Another option home and unschooling students are pursuing is earning college credit at community colleges or online before attending a traditional college. From a financial perspective it might make good sense to earn credits from a more affordable institution in advance of attending a traditional four-year institution. Another option is to earn college credits through standardized tests such as the [College Level Examination Program](#) (CLEP). CLEP is a group of standardized tests that assess college-level knowledge in several subject areas. Students who earn credit by passing the tests. Over at the [College for Homeschoolers](#) site Calfi Cohen shares additional great tips such as colleges that provide a free education for those who meet their requirements, colleges whose programs have students engaging in real world work and experiences, colleges without exams or grades, a college geared toward students with ADHD, as well as advice for those who want to homeschool for college and attend a "virtual" university.

If you’re thinking, “This sounds great, but a student who has not attended school surely must meet some admission requirements.” You’re right. There are many things you can do to ensure your home or unschooled child gets into the school of their choice.

### **Idea 18 - Prepare for College Admission**

Not only can children who don’t attend school get into a good college, as the [Learn in Freedom](#) website explains, those who prepare thoroughly can even be admitted with scholarships. The site goes on to explain that colleges that accept homeschoolers rely on various materials in place of high school grades. While criteria will vary widely, here are some of requirements schools may request.

- SAT or ACT scores
  - Some selective colleges will admit anyone with a score above a certain level.
  - This is not a requirement for all colleges. According to FairTest, the Center for Fair and Open Testing, there are nearly 300 colleges and universities that no longer use the SAT. Here is a [list of those schools](#).
- GED
- Grades from open admission community colleges
- Extracurricular activities could be a key to getting a scholarship

- Personal recommendations
- Portfolios of student work
- Applicant's personal essay

The College Board, who sponsors the SAT college-entrance exams has created a page devoted to the application process for those who have not attended school that [outlines the approach such students must take](#) to be accepted into college.

Sandra Dodd has compiled some terrific resources sharing how student work can be documented for a portfolio in this [blog post](#) and on this [page from her site](#) as well as how you can turn the “curriculum” of an unschooler into educationese which you can find [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#). Helen Barret also has terrific information on how to create electronic/digital portfolios using free tools on her [site](#).

### **Idea 19 - The Military**

For some children and their families, the military, might be an attractive option. As [Calfi Cohen shares](#) homeschoolers who are willing to serve time in the military should consider the Air Force Academy (CO), Coast Guard Academy (CT), West Point (NY), and the Naval Academy (MD). These government-funded institutions pay all college expenses for four years and expect a pay back of from five to ten years of service. Homeschoolers have been admitted to all the academies.

### **Idea 20 - You Don't Have to Go to College or the Military to Be Successful**

Isn't it funny that one of the biggest players in the college reform game never bothered to graduate himself? And, he's no exception holding good company with some of our country's most successful CEOs including Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, Ted Turner, and David Geffen. While we all know that many of the great performers of our time and the past moved on to great success without college, this is not just true for businessmen and those in the arts. Many well known writers (William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, George Orwell, J.K. Rowling, J.D. Salinger) never graduated or even bothered looking at colleges. And, perhaps most interestingly is that dignitaries like Sir Winston Churchill and several U.S. presidents (Truman, Washington, Lincoln and Van Buren) never attended college. More and more, [smart students and their parents are also beginning to understand that a college education is not what it's cracked up to be](#).

A whole generation has [lied to children telling them if they studied hard and went to a good college](#) the rest would take care of itself. In the meantime, in many cases we never bothered to help children discover, uncover, explore, and develop their passions, talents, and interests. They end up like I was when I graduated college with honors and

stood with a diploma in one hand and scratching my head with the other wondering what the heck I was going to do next.

Before you decide that college is the path for your child's success, figure out who your child is and what they care about. It may just be that college is not a necessary stop on that journey.