

## **Do grades really matter?**

**A growing body of evidence suggests grades don't predict success -- C+ students are the ones who end up running the world**

**SARAH SCOTT, MACLEAN's, August 30, 2007**

Back at Thornhill high school in the early 1970s, Mike Cowie and his brother Mark didn't pay much attention to their school work. For one thing, the identical twins were working at a garage after school to pay for their cars. They were bored in the classroom and didn't see any practical point in the curriculum. Why, for example, should they memorize a bunch of "common musical terms" from an eccentric music teacher who claimed he let his dog sit in the driver's seat on the way to school? They emerged from high school with C-pluses and a few Bs, just enough to get into university. Their father gave each of them \$600 for tuition on one condition -- they get out of town.

Now, their old teachers may be surprised to learn that the Cowie brothers are among Canada's most successful commercial real-estate brokers, doing mega-million-dollar real-estate deals for corporate Canada. From their modest offices in downtown Toronto, they can see some of the high-rise buildings they've helped clients buy, sell, lease or build. You've got to be able to read people, says Mark. "I look for little signs" -- how they sit, how they hold their arms, what they do with their hands, which way they look. Just recently he saw a potential deal start to crater when a developer failed to look a prospective client in the eye as they were shaking hands. "I can understand inflections, how people say things," says Mark. "You can tell if they're hesitating."

The Cowies' success is the story your high school teacher may not want you to know. It's the triumph of the C+ student, the guy who won't be voted Most Likely to Succeed. He's bored in class, and comes home with withering report cards that say things like, "If only he tried harder." His eyes glaze over as his high school English teacher tries to whip up enthusiasm for Shakespeare. He gets lousy marks because he does not want to deliver what the teacher demands. But then, in university or maybe later, he turns on -- and becomes so successful that the school brings him back to give speeches to the kids. High school marks, it turns out, do not predict how well you'll do later in life.

High school marks don't even predict how well you will do in first-year university, says James Parker, who holds the Canada Research Chair in emotion and health at Trent University. "In our culture, high school marks are the most important thing," he says. "Yet if you look at success in first year, high school marks don't predict that very well." A decade ago, Parker started tracking students who arrived at Trent in first year and found that high school marks don't even predict who's going to drop out. "Lots of other things beside high school performance predict achievement later on."

So there's hope for the C+ student in high school. "The truth is that many indifferent students do extremely well in business because the set of skills required to be a good student does not match the set of skills to be a success in the world," says Michael

Thompson, a University of Chicago-trained psychologist and co-author of the bestseller, *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. He likes to quote the old line: "School is a place where former A students teach mostly B students to work for C students." It may be an overgeneralization, but it has "more truth than educators are comfortable with," he says.

As a psychologist, Michael Thompson spends a lot of time talking to anxious parents in Canada and the U.S. about their children's performance in high school. He keeps telling them that a C+ does not mean the kid is headed for a dismal future. High school grades, after all, measure one thing -- whether the teacher thinks the student has mastered the curriculum. But some kids, especially boys, are just not interested in delivering what the teacher wants. Boys, he says, often think school is "stupid, boring and inefficient," says Thompson. "They're just waiting for it to be over." Girls, on the other hand, do better in school, even though they're bored too, because they want to impress the teacher. Boys, he says, are more active, impulsive and impatient. "They support each others' dislike for school."

So the report card goes home with the C+ marks and the parents fume. Why won't their son do his homework? Is he a loser? Maybe not.

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There are innumerable examples of poor students who changed the world -- or made a pile of money. Winston Churchill was famously at the bottom of his class at Harrow, the exclusive English private school. Richard Branson left high school to run a newspaper he founded. Senator John McCain graduated 894th out of 899 in his class at the U.S. Naval Academy. President George W. Bush was a solid C student in his first year at Yale but showed early promise as a politician because he could remember the names of each of the 54 pledges in his fraternity.

Plenty of successful Canadians were poor students in high school as well. Angus Reid flunked Grade 12 English but built such a successful polling business that he gave his Winnipeg high school money for a wing named after him. Fred Jaekel was kicked out of school in Buenos Aires at age 13. Now he's a multi-millionaire entrepreneur in the auto-parts business with 6,000 employees. Ron Joyce, co-founder of Tim Hortons, dropped out of school after flunking English (while scoring 100 per cent in math) in Grade 9. James Orbinski graduated from a west-end Montreal high school with ho-hum grades in the low 70s. He dropped out of university a couple of times, and yet became a doctor who, in 1999, accepted the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the international organization he led, Médecins sans frontières. Paul Clinton finished high school in Vancouver with a mediocre 70 and dropped out of technical college after a year, but went on to be North American CEO of a global beverage company. Terry Mosher was kicked out of a Toronto high school for possession of dope in Grade 11. When he was accepted to art college in Quebec City, he didn't have a high school certificate, so he drew one, very accurately as it turns out. Now, as the creator of the celebrated Aislin cartoons, the Montreal-based Mosher has been awarded an Order of Canada. And David Thompson

graduated from Toronto's prestigious Upper Canada College with mid-60s, only to be told by a YMCA career test that university would be a waste of his parents' money. But he went on to get good enough marks to get into law school and later became the principal of one of the most sought-after private schools in Toronto. The list goes on.

Take a look at all those former C+ students who are enjoying their million-dollar condos at Whistler while the A students toil in town as intellectual serfs, trying to store away enough money for a modest retirement. It's a big turnaround from high school, where the A students got all the kudos while the C+ students were pummelled with complaints from their parents. So who has the last laugh now?

Consider what psychologists have learned about motivation or drive. Successful people, Harvard psychologist David McClelland found back in the 1960s, are driven, to a greater or lesser extent, by three needs: one is individual achievement -- to start a business or make a million dollars or win a Nobel Prize, for example. The second is relationships, and the third is power. The significance of each depends on the personality you were born with and the influence of parents. But memorizing the "Six Reasons for World War I" in history class is not likely to tap into the powerful urge to make millions or wield power or lead people. That curriculum might not even appeal to future professors. So a student might be bored and unmotivated in class, but then, once he discovers something that fires him up, work so hard that he becomes a resounding success.

Drive is crucial. Without it, even the most brilliant kids will fall short of expectations. Rena Subotnik noticed this when she checked up on 210 graduates of Hunter College Elementary School, a Manhattan school for intellectually gifted children. These kids had a mean IQ of 157 -- higher than over 99 per cent of people. They came from economically advantaged families. If raw intelligence predicts career success, they would surely have it. But when Subotnik checked how the kids turned out, she found that in middle age they had become happy, prosperous, community-minded citizens. But they hadn't aspired to achieve great things. "It was really eye-opening for me," said Subotnik, director of the Center for Psychology in the Schools and Education at the American Psychological Association. "If we do want greatness, IQ is clearly not sufficient." Why they fell short of expectations is not clear, but Subotnik, a Hunter graduate herself, has a theory. "They weren't hungry. They didn't have the drive to prove themselves, which is so necessary to be a force of nature."

Latent drive can appear with a vengeance. Take T. Harv Eker, who was a classic C+ student at high school in Toronto "with a couple of A's thrown in so my parents wouldn't yell." Eker says he wasn't interested in doing the work. "I thought I was wasting my time." He dropped out of York University after one year but now, several decades later, Eker says he's a millionaire "many times over." His book, *Secrets of the Millionaire Mind*, has sold over 650,000 copies. He's taught half a million people in high-energy seminars that their financial success is dictated by their "subconscious blueprint" about money, which was formed at a young age. He knows why he was driven to be rich: "I became a success in order to prove to my parents that I wasn't a bum." He sure couldn't do it through his grades.

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Sometimes the very kind of thinking that leads someone to change the world can cause them to bomb in school. Creative thinkers, the kind who launch businesses and transform how we see things, share many delightful characteristics such as curiosity, an appetite for risk, and an open mind. Bill Gates, though he sailed through private school in Seattle, dropped out of Harvard in his third year to build the company called Microsoft. When he was given an honorary degree there this spring he joked that he was happy to be called "Harvard's most successful dropout."

These sorts of people share traits that are rarely appreciated in the classroom, according to U.S. research. They can be stubborn. They forget details, challenge the teacher, question the rules. They can be disorganized and impulsive. Yet the qualities that drive teachers crazy catapult them to fantastic heights.

Take Fred Jaekel, one of Canada's great business innovators. He still remembers the first time he was thrown out of school. He was 13, and he had just made \$100 off one of his inventions -- wooden, spring-activated pellet guns that could shoot kernels of corn. The principal had the guns lined up on his desk as he called Jaekel's parents to tell them the boy had to go. Jaekel became a tool-and-die apprentice, moved to Canada, and eventually became the head of Magna International's metal stamping division. Jaekel liked to study how things worked, and one day he came up with a great idea while studying plumbing parts in his own home. They were shaped by high-pressure water. What if car parts, which then were welded together, were formed in the same way? That process, hydro forming, helped to catapult Magna into the ranks of the world's top 10 auto parts suppliers. Now, as CEO of Martinrea International Inc., Jaekel didn't miss attending high school. His success came from his unrelenting curiosity.

Creative minds often rebel in school. Albert Schultz, for instance, was so bad in math at his Calgary high school that he needed a tutor (his Grade 11 math teacher) to help him pass Grade 12 math. Even then, he only scored a 39 on the final math exam, just enough to squeak through. Then at York University's fine arts program, Schultz was required to take a science course. When he sat down for the final exam in biology, Schultz signed his name at the top of the paper, took one look at the questions, and closed the book. For the next four hours, he thought about what to do. He immediately quit university and threw himself into the theatre. Now, he's the impresario of a highly regarded theatre in Toronto, Soulpepper. Shultz acts in theatrical classics as well as movies, directs some of the plays, and reviews the numbers of his multi-million-dollar operation every day.

A students, on the other hand, succeed in high school because they delivered what the system wanted. They're often not the type of people to buck the status quo and create something new. A study of 81 high school valedictorians in Illinois illustrates that point. Fifteen years after graduation, these academic champions had turned into solid citizens, accountants, lawyers, engineers and doctors. But not one of them became an entrepreneur or achieved "wildly off-the-charts success," says Karen Arnold, an associate professor in Boston College's education school. "They're not eminent mould-breaker types. Face it, in

high school you've got to do what the teacher tells you." People who are hugely successful have a "single-minded obsession within a single domain. They're not going to make sure the angel food cake rises in home ec."

Straight IQ, or academic marks, account for only 20 per cent of success in the business world, according to psychologist and author Daniel Goleman. "IQ offers little to explain the different destinies of people with roughly equal promises, schooling, and opportunity," Goleman writes in his best-seller, *Emotional Intelligence*. "When 95 Harvard students from the classes of the 1940s were followed into middle age, the men with the highest test scores in college were not particularly successful compared to their lower-scoring peers in terms of salary, productivity or status in their field, nor did they have the greatest life satisfaction, nor the most happiness with friendships, family and romantic relationships."

The other 80 per cent of success, the big slice of the pie, could be any number of factors, such as family wealth and education, temperament, luck and emotional intelligence. The last one is clearly the most important, though. As Goleman describes it, emotional intelligence covers a broad spectrum of abilities -- self-awareness, which includes a sense of self-worth and the ability to read one's own emotions; self-management, which includes initiative, optimism and controlling disruptive emotions; social awareness, the ability to read other people's emotions; and the ability to manage relations, by influencing, cultivating a web of bonds, working in teams, leading with a compelling vision. The significance of this form of intelligence has been confirmed by 30 years of data on thousands of organizations, notes Rick Lash, a Toronto-based consultant at the Hay Group, the global HR consultancy that works with Goleman. While any big corporate job requires a healthy IQ, it's only an entry ticket, says Lash, North American director of the Hay Group's leadership and talent practice. The difference between the corporate stars and the also-rans lies in other qualities -- such as the ability to manage your emotions and read other people's feelings, your ability to listen effectively, your desire to achieve.

A generation ago, David McClelland, the Harvard psychologist, was asked to find out why so many of the best students from Ivy League schools floundered in the U.S. foreign service. It turned out that top performers on the job took the time to learn all about their potential audience before making a move. They considered how other people were feeling and thinking and adjusted their message accordingly. The Ivy League kids who were flailing did not do this.

Roger Martin, dean of the University of Toronto's Joseph L. Rotman School of Management, may have found a reason why. In a previous job at the consulting firm Monitor, Martin used to hire the top scholars from Harvard, but he noticed they didn't perform any better than other people. Why? "They're told over and over again that they're right. Then they go out in the world and try to be right, and they're flabbergasted when people don't follow."

A lack of insight into people can be dangerous in the corner office. "When a CEO gets let go, or is derailed, it's almost never because he's poor at math or couldn't express himself verbally," says Gary Latham, a professor of organizational behaviour at Rotman. "It's a lack of emotional intelligence, the ability to read yourself and others. A lot of CEOs get in trouble because they can't read their own board. They see heads nodding, but that doesn't necessarily mean agreement."

In 1973, McLelland proposed a radical new way to hire people. Instead of just relying on marks and IQ, employers should identify the behaviours that distinguish the people who succeed in that position, and hire people who behave like that. Drawing on this research, the Hay Group identifies the behaviours needed for any given job, which can vary depending on the job. Many of the competencies are emotional, such as the ability to listen, self-control, flexibility and the ability to work in a team.

These kinds of attributes, of course, don't get a grade in high school, so it would be easy to overlook a future star in business. Take Paul Clinton. He wasn't interested in school, much to the distress of his father, a senior high school administrator in Vancouver. But after dropping out of college, he turned on when he took a sales job at a major packaged goods company. By his early 40s, Clinton was promoted to be North American head of the global beverage company, Diageo. Knowing how to sell was critical. So was the ability to cut through the clutter, identify what was critical for success, and deliver it. And he wouldn't have hit the big time if he didn't know how to manage people -- especially in a company that has to sell its products.

Some schools are getting it. In Toronto, for instance, Greenwood College School was launched in 2002 with a \$10-million donation from Richard Wernham, a former lawyer and money manager. Wernham, the son of educators, says he started the private school because he noticed, in his professional and business career, that the top performers were not necessarily A students in high school. They were often people who had struggled. Success, Wernham thought, was driven by personal qualities like resilience, determination, initiative, the ability to work in a team. Greenwood sets the tone from the start when Grade 7 and 8 students head out for a two-week camping trip. Canoeing teaches perseverance, resilience, interdependence and integrity, says David Thompson, the principal. "It's an incredible leveller. It doesn't matter if an A student is in the bow, and a C+ student is in the stern. Marks are irrelevant. It's how you are."

Meanwhile, Ontario's Education Ministry is trying to instill "character development initiative" in all provincial schools. Teachers will be encouraged to show kids how to read other people's feelings from non-verbal clues, says Avis Glaze, Ontario's chief student achievement officer. Kids might not get a grade for empathy, but it will help them in later life, she says. "In my career as a teacher, I always said: 'Do not write kids off because their marks are not high. They will be stars in the workplace. Why? Because they have the qualities that will assist them.' "

Angus Reid used to sit in the classroom watching the clock to see how long he could hold his breath before getting out of there. Reid was dyslexic and had to complete Grade 12

English in night school. Then, he says, "I began to read stuff I wanted to read," and he ended up with a doctorate. "To be successful, everyone needs the same thing -- a sense of self-esteem," Reid says. "The most important ingredient, whether the academics are good, bad or ugly, is that your self-esteem is intact at the end of the day, so you don't leave high school thinking you're a loser, that you'll never get anywhere in life. I think that's the single most important ingredient, and the one that parents unwittingly steal from their kids.

"There should be some certificate parents get," Reid says. The grade -- pass or fail -- would depend on the answer to the following question: "Did you rob your kid of self-esteem during the really tough developmental process called high school? If it's a pass, you'll be surprised at how things work out."

Getting a C+ in high school might not win you plaudits at home, but it can potentially be an advantage, says entrepreneur Bob Young. Young, who comes from a distinguished business family in Hamilton, went to Trinity College School, then a boys-only boarding school in Port Hope, Ont. "My fatal flaw was that I was incapable of doing anything I was told to do," says Young. He was a C student who spent a lot of time in the library reading about things that were not on the course outline. He made it into the University of Toronto, but after graduating, when he applied for jobs at the banks and the accounting firms, he didn't get any callbacks. "I had no alternative but to go outside the system." Lucky he did. Young co-founded Red Hat, a global open-source software company that shook up the entire industry and made him a billionaire at the peak of the Internet frenzy in 1999.

Now back in Canada, working on a new entrepreneurial venture, Young is glad to have been a C student. "Good students figure out how the system works so they can excel within the system," he says. "As for those of us who didn't figure out how the system works, we became bank robbers or entrepreneurs. That's what makes a lot of us poor students into successful people. Typically, our success does not come from working within the system. It comes from reinventing the system."