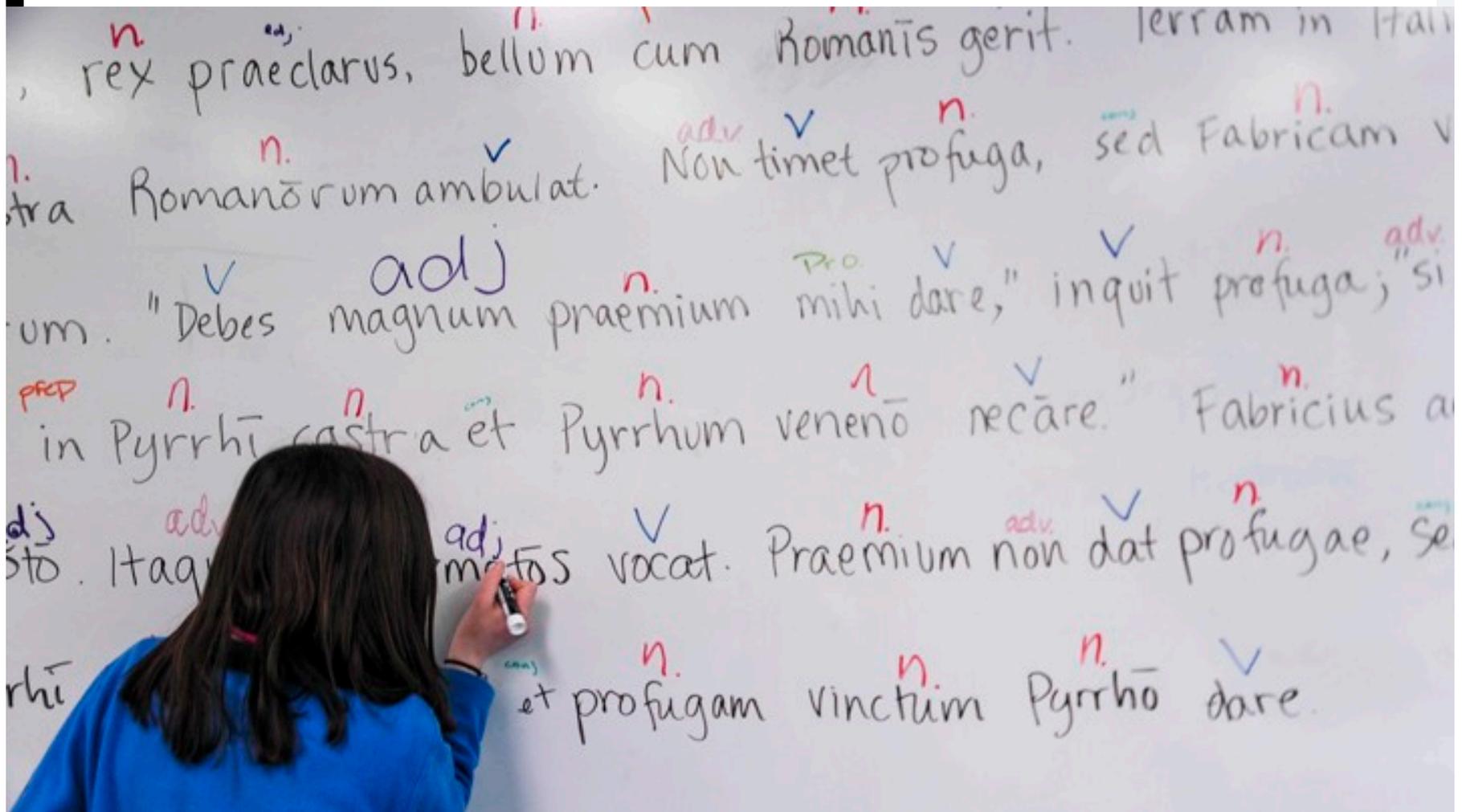


# When Success Leads to Failure

The pressure to achieve academically is a crime against learning.

JESSICA LAHEY AUG 11, 2015



A student identifies parts of speech in a Latin class. (JESSICA LAHEY)

I've known the mother sitting in front of me at this parent-teacher conference for years, and we have been through a lot together. I have taught three of her children, and I like to think we've even become friends during our time together. She's a conscientious mother who obviously loves her children with all of her heart. I've always been honest with her about their strengths and weaknesses, and I think she trusts me to tell her the truth. But when she hits me with the concern that's been bothering her for a while, all I can do is nod, and stall for time.

"Marianna's grades are fine; I'm not worried about that, but she just doesn't seem to love learning anymore."

She's absolutely right. I'd noticed the same thing about her daughter over the

previous two or three years I'd been her middle school English, Latin, and writing teacher, and I have an answer, right there on the tip of my tongue, for what has gone wrong. Yet I'm torn between my responsibility to help Marianna and the knowledge that what I have to say is a truth I'm not sure this mother is ready to hear.

The truth—for this parent and so many others—is this: Her child has sacrificed her natural curiosity and love of learning at the altar of achievement, and it's our fault. Marianna's parents, her teachers, society at large—we are all implicated in this crime against learning. From her first day of school, we pointed her toward that altar and trained her to measure her progress by means of points, scores, and awards. We taught Marianna that her potential is tied to her intellect, and that her intellect is more important than her character. We taught her to come home proudly bearing As, championship trophies, and college acceptances, and we inadvertently taught her that we don't really care how she obtains them. We taught her to protect her academic and extracurricular perfection at all costs and that it's better to quit when things get challenging rather than risk marring that perfect record. Above all else, we taught her to fear failure. That fear is what has destroyed her love of learning.

I look at this mother with concern on her face, her eager pencil poised to write down my words of wisdom. I struggle to find a gentle way to explain that the daily nagging about points and grades both perpetuates Marianna's dependence on her mother's tendency to problem-solve and intervene on her behalf, and teaches her that external rewards are far more important than the effort Marianna invests in her education. Marianna is so concerned with pleasing her parents that the love she used to feel for learning has been crowded out by her craving for their validation.

This mother's hovering comes from a place of love—that's clear. She wants the world for her children, and yet the very things she's doing to encourage the sort of achievement she feels will help them secure happiness and honors may be undermining their future success.

Marianna is very smart and high-achieving, and her mother reminds her of that on a daily basis. However, Marianna does not get praised for the diligence and effort

she puts into sticking with a hard math problem or a convoluted scientific inquiry. If that answer at the end of the page is wrong, or if she arrives at a dead end in her research, she has failed—no matter what she has learned from her struggle. And contrary to what she may believe, in these more difficult situations she is learning. She learns to be creative in her problem-solving. She learns diligence. She learns self-control and perseverance. But because she is scared to death of failing, she has started to take fewer intellectual risks. She has trouble writing rough drafts and she doesn't like to hypothesize or think out loud in class. She knows that if she tries something challenging or new, and fails, that failure will be hard evidence that she's not as smart as everyone keeps telling her she is. Better to be safe. Is that what we want? Kids who get straight As but hate learning? Kids who achieve academically, but are too afraid to take leaps into the unknown?

Marianna's mother was extremely successful in school and in business, and she knows the value of that hard work in her own life. Her mother allowed her to fail and play and learn for the sake of learning, but now that she's parenting her own child, she's lost sight of the value of struggle. She is too worried about Marianna's future achievements to allow her daughter to work through the obstacles in her path. She wants to give Marianna everything and yet she forgets that her best childhood experiences likely arose from the thrill of facing challenge, from the moments she lost herself in the trying and, when she failed, trying again to accomplish something all on her own, simply for the adventure and pleasure inherent in learning something new.

I know this mom because she's just like me. And telling her the truth is hard both because I'm afraid she'll get defensive and angry, and because it means I have to cop to all the same mistakes in my own parenting. Maybe it's time to share some truths with her as I figure out where I went astray, and together we can help our kids rediscover their intellectual bravery, their enthusiasm for learning, and the resilience they need in order to grow into independent, competent adults. With a little luck, they will look back on their childhood and thank us; not just for our unwavering love, but for our willingness to put their long-term developmental and emotional needs before their short-term happiness. For our willingness to let their lives be just a little bit harder today so they will know how to face hardship

tomorrow.

I take a deep breath, cross my fingers, and tell her the truth.

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*This article has been excerpted from Jessica Lahey's new book, The Gift of Failure.*

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