

Margaret Chase Smith Library 2013 Essay Contest

Each year, the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. This year, students were invited to propose what they would do to improve the American educational system. We feature here the top three 2013 prize-winning essays.

THIRD PLACE ESSAY

Improving the American Educational System

By Mariah Damon

I believe that the American education system has a few flaws that cause it to be unsuccessful. Our country has very high drop-out rates, and the programs we currently have are not doing much to fix this. Today's schools are geared toward those people who will continue their education in college after high school. This does not help those who do not want to go to college; sometimes, students who cannot keep up in academics drop out because schools have no other programs for them. Education has become competitive; the main focus is test scores, with many school districts worried about getting better scores than neighboring schools. This is not encouraging to students because they feel that if they cannot keep up, they might as well drop out. However, I believe that this can be fixed by making a few changes to how our students are educated. A few things that could be changed include the No Child Left Behind Act, vocational programs in schools, and how much standardized testing we allow. By addressing these key problems, we could make school more enjoyable and profitable place for every type of student, regardless of what path they choose to take after high school.

First, the U.S. should eliminate the No Child Left Behind Act because it is doing exactly the opposite of what its name says: it is leaving students behind.

This Act created more standardized tests so the performance of different schools could be compared. Although this sounds like a good idea, it also left it up to each state to decide how they would meet the appropriate standards needed to be viewed as successful. Many teachers have begun teaching to the tests, and this has caused the students to lose out on valuable instruction time. In the end, this hurts the students because they are only learning what is on the tests. They are losing out on most of their education and growth, which causes some of them to fall behind. As the National Council of Churches points out in a press release (www.nccusa.org/news/051130NoChildBehind.html), "Instead of treating children 'as unique human beings to be nurtured and educated'...the act has encouraged school districts to regard children as 'products to be tested and managed.'" We are testing our children too much and not giving them an individualized education. Instead, they are forced to learn what everyone else does and they are not given as much individual attention from the teacher. Our schools are turning into assembly lines that only prepare students for the tests that they will have to take. We should stop focusing on trying to meet the No Child Left Behind standards; instead we should try to educate our children with more instruction time and classroom interactions.

A second part of our education system that could be improved is the lack of vocational programs in most schools. Today, American schools are geared toward students who will be entering college after high school, but this is not the best path for everyone. The students who are struggling in the classes that prepare students for college are probably not motivated to attend a four-year university. Instead they may want to do

a more hands-on job such as a mechanic or an electrician. By cutting vocational programs, our schools are not only denying students the right of finding what they have a passion for, they are also eliminating a reason for some students to come to school. Many students, who do not like the academic part of school, enjoy the vocational part. This program is what keeps them from dropping out of high school. A one-size-fits-all model won't work for every student. Our society needs mechanics, welders, and plumbers. Through the eliminations of these programs, we are limiting the number of students with whom our schools can connect and graduate into society. Offering a wider range of vocational programs would lower our drop-out rates because these students would have a reason to come to school.

A final part of our education system that should be changed is the amount of standardized testing that occurs in our schools. By constantly testing our schoolchildren, we are robbing them of valuable lessons and instructional time within the classroom. Many teachers agree that there is too much standardized testing and that sometimes the tests are not always the best indicators of performance. In many schools, teachers have begun teaching to the tests because their students' scores may be correlated with their salaries. This has taken the fun out of learning and made education more about scoring high on these tests. Sure, our children may do well on these tests, but what else will they have learned? Learning should be more individualized and not about what a certain tests needs the students to know. By taking away many of the standardized tests, our school systems would not only be saving money, but both the students and teachers would be much happier. school should be enjoyable and contain many experiences and memories that will stay with the children throughout their lives.

America's education system could be greatly improved by changing some of what we focus on today, including eliminating the No Child Left Behind Act, increasing vocational programs in schools, and decreasing the amount of standardized testing we allow. Through these improvements, we could make education more relatable and enjoyable for all students regardless of career path. In today's world, people need to at least have a high school education to be successful. By changing these three items, U.S. schools could greatly reduce their drop-out rates and make their faculty and pupils happier. Through improving the U.S. education system, we could ensure that all students find the career path that they are destined for. 🐼



Mariah Damon

was valedictorian of her Gardiner Area High School class. She served as vice president of the National

Honor Society, president of Student Council, and captain of the color guard team. She has volunteered at the Pittston Elementary School and Maine General Medical Center. Mariah is enrolled at the University of New England, majoring in pre-pharmacy.