



## ***Race To Nowhere, a Documentary*** Written and Directed by Vicki Abeles

Reel Link Films, 2010. Approximately 85 minutes.

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As I began writing this review of Director Vicki Abeles' film *Race to Nowhere*, I struggled to write a paper suitable for an academic audience about a film intended to reach a public audience. What I enjoyed most about the film was Abeles' ability to merge perspectives of educational scholars with the perspectives of community members in a format capable of reaching a wider audience. Abeles broke through several barriers to complete this project. She broke through the barrier that often separates academic minds from public minds. She interviewed individuals in both urban and rural school settings, as well as students in rich districts and poor districts. She brought to light philosophical issues that affect every member of society regardless of race, social class, or educational background. She inspired her viewers to question the ultimate aims of education, which are often ignored in the wake of *No Child Left Behind*. She challenged the assumptions politicians have made about standardized testing and homework in a way that can change conversations parents have at home with their children. Abeles has started a grass-roots movement that forces viewers to grapple with the importance of having a meaningful education—one that will create happy, creative, emotionally healthy children.

Abeles is more than a lawyer turned filmmaker who asks tough questions about public education. She is a mother who has lived through the pejorative effects of public education on her own children. This film is her story and her children's story; it is also the American people's story about what is at stake in public education.

The questions began when Abeles' oldest daughter succumbed to anxiety and depression. Her daughter, a middle school student, spent the average school night awake until dawn scrambling to complete homework assignments and study for tests. Abeles' son, a grade school student, spent little time outside playing with his peers. He stayed indoors instead laboring over nightly homework assignments, arguing with his parents about completing the minimum requirements. The stress in the Abeles' household, which the children attribute to their school, is a source of contention for the entire family. As a result, Abeles explored alternate school settings for her children only to be disillusioned as she realized they have the same expectations for homework and tests.

When a straight-A student in her neighborhood committed suicide after failing a math test, Abeles began interviewing parents, educators, students, and educational scholars. Her inquiry resulted in a powerful documentary, *Race to Nowhere*, which is a call to parents, teachers, administrators, and community members to rethink the U.S. educational system. The title, which Abeles chose before President Obama's *Race to the Top* legislation came into effect, originates from a quote in the film from a student who believes he is in a race to nowhere as he chases high-test scores and perfect grades.

The film portrays anecdotal interviews with students, teachers, and parents in diverse settings. All of who convey the same hysterical message: our schools are not teaching children how to think, or even engaging them with the subject matter. On the contrary, schools are creating an

environment where cheating is commonplace, school-related anxiety is rampant, and children are memorizing information just to regurgitate on a test.

Throughout the film, Abeles and the commentators critique what they believe is the main aim of education—how much a student can produce: straight-As, honors classes, high-test scores, and admission into an elite university are some of the “products.” The idea that students should have opportunities to develop creative and critical thinking skills in an environment that nurtures their well-being is the counter message of the film. The commentators pose several questions: “What does it take to produce a happy, motivated, creative human being? What happens when we have a whole population of dentists and doctors who have learned from the script?” (Abeles, 2010).

During the early part of the documentary (the anecdotal student perspectives portion—which at times border on complete hysteria), leave the viewer questioning whether the stories represent the common American school. Students interviewed in the film cite the pressure they feel from teachers and parents to participate in multiple extra-curricular activities and community service projects so their college applications look better. In addition, they describe what they believe are the effects of having 4-7 hours of homework every night on top of after school commitments: insomnia, eating disorders, anxiety, and depression are some of the conditions noted. One student cited her dream to be the first person in her family to go to college. Her enthusiasm for her dream turns to sheer panic as she discusses her fears of the ACT. She worries that the ACT, and her poor test-taking skills, will keep her from attaining her dream. Other voices of students cracked in apprehension as they shared their dreams of getting into elite colleges, fears of performing well enough on the SAT, and anxiety over doing enough extra-curricular activities. One student speaking on a panel shares an example of the worst question parents can ask their children, which happens to be one word: “And?”

Child: "I'm taking three honors courses."

Parent: "And?"

Child: "Well, I have the lead in the school play."

Parent: "And?"

Child: "I made the volleyball team."

Parent: "And?" (Abeles, 2010).

As the film progresses, Abeles does a fine job demonstrating that there is enough blame to go around; and how the complexity of the issues are not narrowly defined or remedied through an existing paradigm of thought. Abeles asserts that members of society need to start questioning the purpose of public education.

In the middle of the film, Abeles introduces educational scholars and researchers to back up some of the concerns. One of the highlights includes statements from Dr. Denise Pope, author of *Doing School: How we are Creating a Generation of Stress-out, Miseducated, and Materialistic Students*. Pope takes viewers back to the axiological aspects of education as she questions how we value and define success. One of the problems, Pope shares, is in how we define achievement. “When success is defined by high grades, test scores, trophies, we know we end up with unprepared, disengaged, and ultimately unhealthy kids” (Abeles, 2010).

Pope outlines the complexity of the issue, explaining that the pressure to do well in school has created students who are anxiety-ridden, prone to cheating, and disengaged from subject matter. Pope then explains how grade-obsessed students jump through hoops to “do school.” She paints a grim portrait: students memorizing just enough information to do well on a test, which they immediately forget after they fill in the bubbles. Students who have learned how to

play the system and see high school as just another hoop to jump through in order to get accepted into a “good” college. Unfortunately, the ultimate aims of education prove to be ineffective in the film. Receiving an acceptance letter into a “good college” does not mean much according to the film.

A college counselor at UCLA steps forward to share an alarming statistic: 50% of college freshman, the ones who have high-test scores and AP coursework on their applications, have to retake basic math and language classes (Abeles, 2010). Apparently, they know how to “do school,” but have not learned the skills necessary to do basic reading, writing, and arithmetic.

A clinical psychologist, Dr. Wendy Mogel, author of *The Blessing of Skinned Knee*, emphasizes the importance of play and suggests that we are robbing students of their childhood. Her impassioned plea provokes a sense of responsibility in the adults directly involved in the students’ lives. The typical classroom in the film is a place of stress for students and teachers alike. Teachers step forward to emphasize the lack of engagement in their classrooms, the pressure to teach to the test under *No Child Left Behind*, and teach the state standards that have nothing to do with their curriculum. One teacher breaks down in tears as she describes how much she loves teaching her students, and fears they will think she is abandoning them. She is quitting her job because she disagrees with the district’s emphasis on test-taking, state standards, and grades.

All of the experts interviewed in the film seem to agree that the adoption of *No Child Left Behind* in 2002 has increased the problems in public education. They contend that the issue is complex wherein several factors—the achievement-driven culture in America, educational policies, expectations from parents, teachers, and administrators—all play a contributing role in creating the problems.

One expert asks provocative, yet obvious questions: “Why can’t we have children who love going to school right up until 12th grade? Kids come to the table with a love of life and love of learning; can’t we at least just not take that out of them?” (Abeles, 2010).

The idea of creating happy, well-adjusted students who love to learn, and think critically about issues is what the experts and teachers state is missing in public education. One child psychiatrist throws out a challenge for everyone involved, “We need to think about what does it take to produce a happy, motivated, creative human being?” (Abeles, 2010).

While *Race to Nowhere* has many brilliant moments that bring to light important issues in public education, the film falters toward the end in an attempt to prove its point. The weakest moments include a haphazard effort from Abeles to prove that C-students rule the world, and that college-dropouts are some of the most successful members of society. She cites CEOs from various companies who do not have a college education. Her exaltation of the average student and the college dropout seems irreverent in the face of the pressing issues presented in the film.

Another distasteful component is Abeles’ appropriation of a student suicide as proof of the film’s message. The discussion of an “honors” student whose parents believe committed suicide over a failing test score seems more than just a little exploitative. This small part of the film lasts only a little under five minutes, but feels like fifteen.

While the film struggles to prove some of its points in the end, the overall message of the film is honest, powerful, and alarming enough to facilitate change. Abeles, who is using the film as the vehicle to start a grassroots movement, should be commended for bridging the gap between the academic community and the general public. *Race to Nowhere* is a call to reshape the ontological conditions of education: a call to question what really matters, and change what is really happening in our schools. What will it take for us as a society to answer the call?

## References

Abeles, V. (Producer & Director). 2010. *Race to Nowhere* [Motion Picture]. (Available from Reel Link Films, 3527 Mt. Diablo Boulevard, Lafayette, CA)

Contact Reel Link Films at the address above for information regarding film ordering or scheduling a public screening of the film in your community.

Resources & Research (2011). Retrieved January 9, 2011, from [www.racetonowhere.com/statistics](http://www.racetonowhere.com/statistics).

This website provides a complete bibliography of journal articles, newspaper articles, books, and internet sources used to support the film's message. The topics of research include homework, cheating, disengagement, play, downtime, depression, suicide, physical injuries, sleep, stress, drug abuse, testing, AP placement, and educational policies.