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# Biography of a Struggling Student: My Story

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**Me and my awesome younger brother Adam**

*This story is probably way more than you need to know, but since a lot of people tell me how much they relate, and since I believe in transparency, I've chosen to really put myself out there. I hope this is helpful to you.*

As you know, my name is Seth, and you probably won't be surprised to learn that *I was the struggling student that I work to help nowadays*. Yep, I was "that kid." Kindergarten was fine, but here are some rave reviews quoted directly from from my 1st grade report cards:

*“ Slow worker. Very easily distracted. Loves school. Wants to be helpful. Very short attention span and never really gets into his work. Exhibits a very deep feeling and enjoyment. He loves stories. If I could only get him stimulated I know he would do well. He is a very thoughtful child. I think he is much brighter than he lets on and my hope is that as he matures and his short attention span increases, he will show greater academic progress.*

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Even in first grade I couldn't fit in the proverbial box, and it only got worse in later grades. The same sort of comments appeared:

*“ Lazy. Unmotivated. Not living up to his potential. Daydreams. Needs to work harder. Doesn't try his best. Doesn't pay attention. Needs to focus. If he would just apply himself, he'd be okay.*

Well, here's the message I internalized: *I'm not okay, I'm somehow broken. I'm a failure. I can't do it well enough, so I'm not enough. Why even try?*

Of course I had strengths, *but they weren't built upon enough through traditional schooling*, and I needed tools & insights that simply weren't available back then. So, I struggled, a lot. I felt like a “failure” and felt a great deal of shame.

## **Patterns**

Adopted at the ripe old age of 3 days by an incredible family in Columbus, OH, I was a happy kid, but *I never quite felt like I fit in*. There was a sense that I was somehow different. I was creative and my imagination was wild and vivid. I would draw entire stories on giant rolls of paper, spanning 30 feet or more. I would collect countless random objects, take things apart, make inventions. Some of them even worked. I was a lover of the natural world, bugs, plants, animals, rocks. I was intuitive and highly sensitive to

what was going on around me. And I was a free-spirited dreamer, adventuring through my world — but schooling would minimize this.

Year after year, my grades slipped. Instead of developing my strengths, I tried to fit into the expectations of the school. *Square peg, round hole.* My frustration and hopelessness grew and I gave up trying. Unconsciously, it came down to this: school wasn't worth the effort since I just ended up feeling badly about myself anyhow. *I wasn't able to access learning in the way it was presented and I felt like a failure.*

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I was tested for learning disabilities in middle school and there were none identified. They said I had a high IQ but there were no programs at the time, and just *having that knowledge didn't help me gain access to any strategies or tools to help.*

So I floundered through high school. I did fine the first two years with minimal effort. I always was strong out of the gates, but quickly lost momentum and let my work slide. I couldn't manage all the minutiae, so I didn't do much homework or studying. If I did homework, I often forgot to turn it in or lost it. *I didn't know how to be a student in the system.* It was as if the other kids got a instruction book on how to be a student, that I was never given.

My grades really began to suffer in the 11th and 12th grade. D's and F's became the norm as I became more apathetic and as my parents became more concerned. They watched helplessly as I lied about how I was doing and as I pushed them away when they tried to help.

My grades were horrible, but somehow I graduated high school. High SAT scores made it possible for me to enter Ball State University in a remedial program and on probation. The program required me to take 3 college classes in the summer, right after high school ended. I got 2 C's and an A. Ironically, the A was in Study Skills — I was always able to pull it together

when the pressure was on, to make it “look” like I had things under control. At least it got people off my back for a bit.

I immediately failed the fall semester and was put on academic probation. I failed spring semester, was officially kicked out, and moved back home with the folks. I looked for any job that would hire me.

I didn't want to live with my parents — I wanted to be treated like an adult even though I acted like an irresponsible kid. I ended up living with my grandmother, one of the most amazing people I've ever known. Tried again at a community college in Columbus, Ohio. Same pattern — started strong, optimistic with new resolve.

But things went downhill fast. Failed again.

By this time I was really hopeless and suffering internally. I felt like a complete failure and knew I would never be able to accomplish anything in life. What went wrong? Why was I broken? Why try? I gave up.

## Turning it around

One day, after months of self-pity, I hurt so badly that I decided I would do whatever I had to do to give it a real try once again. I was willing to do anything, including asking for help repeatedly until I got the help I needed. **This** was the hardest thing of all.

I began to change, slowly but surely. Momentum was building. I was having little successes. I got a minimum wage job I liked. I went home from work feeling good about what I had done. There was meaning in my work, and ironically, I was working with kids. And I was good at it.

I'm so thankful for that job because it literally changed the course of my life. It was for a company called AYS (At Your School), in Indianapolis. I don't know if it exists anymore. I worked with a woman named Candy Hammond – I've since lost touch with her and cannot locate her.

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Nonetheless, she was a BRILLIANT teacher, and she showed me that you could positively impact a child's life, that you can make a real difference. She was my first mentor and neither of us knew it. She inspired me to want to be better at serving kids. I would watch in awe as she would artfully listen to the students on a level so deep, it was almost spiritual. She *attuned* to the kids, she saw what they really needed, but not as students first. *She saw their needs as human beings first.* There's a critical distinction here. I wanted to be able to help kids like she did. And this is how my professional journey began in 1993.

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One day, while driving home from AYS, I had a big smile across my face and I realized that I wasn't that hopeless person anymore. Somewhere in the past several months those things that made me hopeless had been put to sleep. I was alive, invigorated. I realized then that I always left work happy and it was at that moment that I dedicated my life to helping kids. I didn't know how I would do it and I didn't care. All I knew was that I needed to follow this path.

I went back to school to become a teacher and worked harder than I ever worked in my life. I probably worked harder than almost everyone in my classes because I didn't have strong student skills. I literally would sit at my desk, sometimes reading the same sentence 10 times before it would sink in, determined to succeed. It was painstaking. Every trick I could think of to make learning easier I did. I didn't know it, but I was coaching myself.

I ended up doing pretty well. Through some twist of fate, I was the student asked to represent my graduating class at Indiana University by speaking at my graduation. Me, the once "hopeless failure". Through all of this, I learned beyond a shadow of a doubt that kids don't have to suffer, that they can be successful and most importantly, happy.

But kids need the *right* tools. *Schools need to meet students where they are at.* They need to see students *holistically* and build upon *strengths*. Left brained students usually navigate the system just fine, as it aligns with

their strengths. But there are so many outside-the-box thinkers that don't fit the mold. They might be random, global, big picture, poor with details, creative, quirky, or otherwise divergent learners. The fact is, *when struggling students are properly understood and educated, they shine.*

Nowadays I love my life. I've built rich relationships, a career that I'm passionate about, a healthy lifestyle, a positive outlook, fulfilling hobbies, and most importantly, I'm pretty happy. So, in the greatest humility, I feel infinitely grateful that I've found my strengths. It's my hope that I can share them here in such a way that it helps more and more kids have increasingly better lives.

Shine on,  
Seth Perler

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**Katie Anderson, Contributor**  
College Student in Norther California

# My Bittersweet High School Experience

09/18/2012 09:12 am ET | Updated Nov 18, 2012

Many of us struggle in high school trying to figure out who we are, building relationships, coming into adulthood. It isn't easy. It's hectic. It's messy. It's draining and exhausting in every sense of the word.

For me?

High school was one of the worst experiences of my life.

First, the struggle was that I wasn't feeling challenged in my classes (aside from math, but that is an entirely different story). I felt that the teachers on campus were only there so that they could get a decent paycheck. I had friends (and some amazing ones), but I was never in the popular crowd — I was stuck.

I wasn't happy.

A friendship-turned-relationship had fallen apart. It was my first taste of pure heartbreak. I was sinking into the first major depression of my life. I felt alone, unwanted and lost.

Teachers didn't seem to care at all — few people reached out to me to see if I was okay. And on the rare occasion that I did open up and tell someone what I was struggling with, I got the classic “Things aren't that bad” or “You're fine.”

That didn't help. In fact, a lot of times it made things even worse.

I don't remember a lot of my high school experience because I blocked most of it out. To this day, there are still memories that I don't even know if they are real or if they are just some pieced-together dream. Later on, I learned that blocking things out was my way of coping.

On top of not feeling like the teachers and staff cared about their students, not being challenged in my classes (or really learning in some of them), I was dealing with a few health issues of my own. I knew that there were some things that were not right. I knew that my eating habits were not right. I struggled (and I still do today) — and then I finally mustered up what little courage I had to get help...

“wrong” with me — but many people in my day-to-day life were starting to notice the behaviors and the weight loss.

I never went back to get help for that. That experience scarred me for life.

I went to the doctor for help because I knew I needed it — only to be torn down and feel like no one believed me. I was in and out of therapy/counseling but I hated it — I had a hard enough time opening up to my few close friends, so how was I supposed to open up to a complete stranger? Even these memories are fuzzy and most of them blocked out only to resurface years down the road and send me into a spiral of confusion.

Around that time, my mother began to have some of her own health issues. I didn’t understand at that point in time what panic attacks were or how they happened but all I knew was that my mother was in and out of a local hospital to get help.

I missed a lot of school.

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I sank back into a depression and began to struggle with my own anxiety. We moved a few times and my grades dropped lower and lower, but I didn’t care at that point. I hated high school. I hated life and what it had turned into. I had no motivation.

In many ways, I felt like a failure — but how was I supposed to feel encouraged and like I could get through this in a school where so few cared? How was I supposed to figure out what I wanted out of life or to build relationships when everything around me had begun to fall apart?

I couldn’t. So I stopped trying.

I was transferred to a new school the summer of what would have been my junior year of high school. The first day of school was September 11. As if starting at a new school wasn’t hard enough, now I was sitting in my grandmother’s living room watching everything play out.

The new school wasn’t much better — again, I struggled to fit in, and the classes didn’t challenge me. Teachers didn’t care and I struggled to get through, but somehow I made it. I made it until I realized that something had to change.

That change was leaving high school altogether and working on my GED. I started off at a local adult education center, but the structure of the class didn’t work well with me so I moved around a bit more before I realized I could study and learn the material on my own at home.

I enrolled in my local community college and the changes were amazing.



and I was coming back stronger than ever.

Looking back on it, I wish I knew that high school wasn't for me. I felt trapped, lost and alone. I didn't have that experience you hear so many people talk about where they made the best memories of their lives in high school. My experience was the exact opposite.

Looking back on those years and comparing them to where I am now is shocking because I am two different people. Now, I am doing well, feeling challenged in my classes and have a lot of teachers who truly do care about their students. I am at a school that I love and I am on a campus that offers the help I need when things get rough.

It took a lot of time and years of struggling, but I made it through. Even though I hated high school and all the hell I experienced in those years, I'm thankful that I had those experiences to help me get to where I am now.

A lesson to my teenage self: You'll find yourself looking back on experiences when things didn't work out and saying, "That is who I was, and this is who I am now." High school isn't for everyone, and it certainly wasn't for me — but without the experience, I wouldn't be where I am today.

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## High School Reform

# STUDENT VOICE: My life in high school in one word? Struggle

*'It's the challenges that push you'*

by EDISON ESTES

December 4, 2017

**T**here's something of a social expectation that one "peaks in high school" and that the best years of one's life are spent running the tiled halls.

I'd like to say I enjoyed the last four years of school. But in many ways, my experience has been more complicated than that perception of high school allows for. If I were forced to summarize it with a single word, I would have to answer "struggle."

Oftentimes it was a struggle on the part of a new school. My graduating class, made up of only 47 students, all started as Year One (11th grade) students after transferring from other high schools. I had spent the first two years of high school at the Baltimore Design school.



Edison Estes

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At Bard High School Early College Baltimore, students, faculty and administration of this novel new school had to learn how to work together to build and shape the school community. We didn't even have a real building our first year, instead working out of temporary trailer units.

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**“It’s not always the moments you “enjoy” that you learn the most from.”**

Sometimes the struggle was against the bureaucratic hurdles facing the administration, the unfamiliar territory of college classes in a high school setting, or the constant need to improvise with the space and materials at our disposal.

Other times — oftentimes — it was a struggle against myself and the challenging academic work, my insufficient study habits that often led to cramming, or my poor sleeping habits. These struggles often led to anxiety and stress that I still am striving to handle.

But it's not always the moments you “enjoy” that you learn the most from, is it? It's the challenges that really push you, the seemingly impossible or insurmountable obstacles. Those are what push you to reevaluate what you're capable of, force you to adapt and grow or be left floundering in the dust.

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Amid all of the hurdles and struggles that faced me at BHSEC, I received a powerful education that has shaped me enormously.

When I first arrived, I thought I was already a great writer. But after two years of being pushed by my excellent literature professors to try new things and to exceed the limits of what I thought I was capable of, I can now gladly say that not only am I more skilled than in my first years, but also that I am able to fully recognize how much I have left to learn.

One of my absolute favorite moments was when my literature professor said on one of my first report cards from Bard that I “think like a writer.” Other times, teachers would ask me to lend my writing or graphic design skills to a specific project for the school, most recently the inaugural release of *The Nook*, Bard Baltimore’s new student literature publication. These moments have helped me to better understand my personal passions and guide me as I move forward with my education.

Though it took me two years, I finally achieved something of an ability to work on personal projects without external forces pushing me to do so, an ability that in the past my lack of would lead me into some truly dreadful feelings of self-doubt.

Now, I am constantly writing new short stories and uploading them online, to a sort of social media for writers. I have found a passion that I am driven to pursue outside of the classroom, but one that truly emerged through my classroom experiences at Bard. And what’s more, I am able to recognize how much I am still able to develop that ability, how much I myself still have to mature.

So no, perhaps I cannot truthfully say that I “peaked” in high school. I cannot really say that I enjoyed my time. But I also cannot ignore all the growth I now know I am capable of, thanks to my high school

education. I cannot say that years of struggle and pride, of highs and lows, anger and joy, depression and elation, go unappreciated.

Yes, the experience was often extremely difficult, but as a plant does not grow without straining toward the sun, an environment of challenge is what I needed to become a more mature, more capable young adult ready to move forward with my college education and life.

Though my proficiency as a student still needs work in college, I have arrived much more capable of handling the challenges of my new school than I would have without my experience at BHSEC Baltimore.

Without a doubt, I have regrets, things I wish I could go back and do differently. But I fail to see how anyone could go through high school, much less high school and two years of college, and come out stronger, without making mistakes along the way. Mistakes are what define you, the challenge of learning from those mistakes is the foundation on which you grow, and on which the educational prowess of BHSEC Baltimore is built.

It may have been a bit more difficult than I would have expected.

But the program nevertheless pushed me hard through trial and tribulation so that I could come out stronger on the other side.

*This story was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up here for our newsletter.*

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