

'Race to Nowhere' asks whether kids are pushed too far

I tutor a third-grader. Let's call her Jane. She hates tests.

We were squeezing in some reading this week minutes before she started her Benchmarks — countywide tests that gauge a student's proficiency in math and reading — when she blurted out how she felt.

"It's boring," she told me. "I have to circle stuff. It makes me nervous. It stresses me out because it's hard, and it's just boring. You have to work for, like, two hours, and you don't do anything else."

I scribbled down what she said on a scrap piece of paper because it reminded me of Monday's community screening of "Race to Nowhere," the documentary about the sober side of our nation's education system.

For weeks, I'd heard about the film and the groundswell of activism nationwide — more than 1,500 community screenings in 44 states all doing one thing: putting education under everyone's microscope.

Then, I saw it. I realized there are so many students just like Jane.

Now she's just a third-grader from a single-parent home, and these students in the film were high schoolers from the comfortable suburbs of California, all burned out by being over-scheduled, over-worked and over-tested.

Meanwhile, North Carolina is not California. And for me, the film showed the extreme consequences of our culture of achievement, our "race to nowhere," with all kinds of stories, including one in which a 13-year-old girl committed suicide over a bad math grade.

Still, I saw me and my family on screen.

My daughter is a third-grader, and my son is a sixth-grader. My kids like school. But when my son hit middle school, I watched him work on homework for sometimes four hours a night.

Then his tests — those lovely Benchmarks three times a year. Then his everything else: Boy Scouts, basketball, band, church, guitar, middle school running club and, oh yeah, us, his family.

So, you get the idea. "Race to Nowhere" will make you think.

That happened two weeks ago at Canterbury School, the private Episcopal school in Greensboro. The school scheduled a screening of "Race to Nowhere." About 100 parents came.

"For me, what it did was raise the question of what does it mean to be a child," says Burns Jones, the school's headmaster. "I'm still processing it



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WANT TO GO?

What: "Race To Nowhere"

When: 7 p.m. Monday

Where: Carousel Luxury Cinemas, 1305 Battleground Ave., Greensboro

Cost: \$10 online; \$15 at the door

Information: 230-1620, www.racetonowhere.com/state-screenings/NC

Etc: The ticket price covers the cost of bringing the film to Greensboro. The panel afterward will include two teachers, a college admissions counselor, a Guilford County Schools official in charge of its gifted curriculum program, and Margaret Arbuckle, executive director of the Guilford Education Alliance.

all, but it showed how important it is to allow kids to be themselves, to play outside and not have every minute of the day to be scheduled. It's OK to be bored."

Abigail Seymour feels the same way. She's 43, a mother of two children, ages 3 and 5. She read about "Race to Nowhere" in the New York Times and heard filmmakers were helping set up community screening nationwide.

So Seymour set one up in Greensboro. She got a panel of educators and booked the Carousel Cinemas.

Yet, she hadn't seen the movie.

"It was a leap of faith," Seymour says. "I hoped that I would like the movie, and that it was as powerful as I thought it was. But when I saw it, it was. This running in all directions. Trying to compete. It robs children of their childhood."

"My children are on the cusp of their education, but I think it's good for all of us to look in the mirror and think, 'Ooooo, I do that sometimes.'"

"Race To Nowhere," a 2009 film produced by a California mother worried about her three stressed-out kids, will force you to ask yourself tough questions — about education, about parenting, about your definition of success.

And when you do, you'll find your own Jane.

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