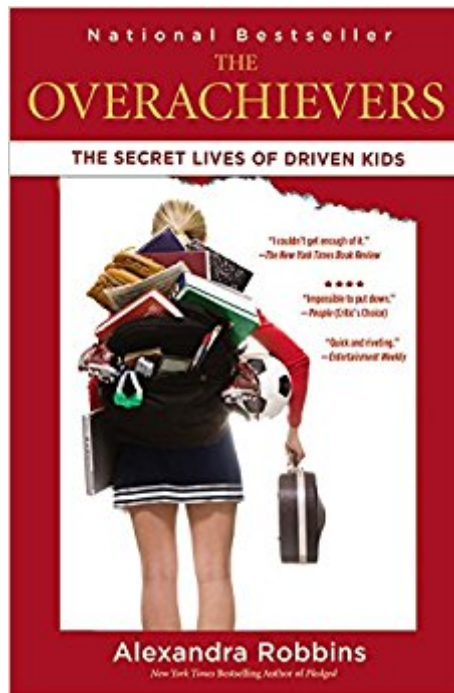


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# The Overachievers: The Secret Lives Of Driven Kids



## Synopsis

"You can't just be the smartest. You have to be the most athletic, you have to be able to have the most fun, you have to be the prettiest, the best dressed, the nicest, the most wanted. You have to constantly be out on the town partying, and then you have to get straight As. And most of all, you have to appear to be happy." -- CJ, age seventeen High school isn't what it used to be. With record numbers of students competing fiercely to get into college, schools are no longer primarily places of learning. They're dog-eat-dog battlegrounds in which kids must set aside interests and passions in order to strategize over how to game the system. In this increasingly stressful environment, kids aren't defined by their character or hunger for knowledge, but by often arbitrary scores and statistics. In *The Overachievers*, journalist Alexandra Robbins delivers a poignant, funny, riveting narrative that explores how our high-stakes educational culture has spiraled out of control. During the year of her ten-year reunion, Robbins returns to her high school, where she follows students, including CJ and others: Julie, a track and academic star who is terrified she's making the wrong choices; "AP" Frank, who grapples with horrifying parental pressure to succeed; Taylor, a soccer and lacrosse captain whose ambition threatens her popular girl status; Sam, who worries his years of overachieving will be wasted if he doesn't attend a name-brand college; Audrey, who struggles with perfectionism; and The Stealth Overachiever, a mystery junior who flies under the radar. Robbins tackles hard-hitting issues such as the student and teacher cheating epidemic, over-testing, sports rage, the black market for study drugs, and a college admissions process so cutthroat that some students are driven to depression and suicide because of a B. Even the earliest years of schooling have become insanely competitive, as Robbins learned when she gained unprecedented access into the inner workings of a prestigious Manhattan kindergarten admissions office. A compelling mix of fast-paced storytelling and engrossing investigative journalism, *The Overachievers* aims both to calm the admissions frenzy and to expose its escalating dangers.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In this engrossing anthropological study of the cult of overachieving that is prevalent in many middle- and upper-class schools, Robbins (*Pledged: The Secret Life of Sororities*) follows the lives of students from a Bethesda, Md., high school as they navigate the SAT and college application process. These students are obsessed with success, contending with illness, physical deterioration (senior Julie is losing hair over the pressure to get into Stanford), cheating (students sell a physics project to one another), obsessed parents (Frank's mother manages his time to the point of abuse) and emotional breakdowns. What matters to them is that all-important acceptance to the right name-brand school. "When teenagers inevitably look at themselves through the prism of our overachiever culture," Robbins writes, "they often come to the conclusion that no matter how much they achieve, it will never be enough." The portraits of the teens are compelling and make for an easy read. Robbins provides a series of critiques of the system, including college rankings, parental pressure, the meaninglessness of standardized testing and the push for A.P. classes. She ends with a call to action, giving suggestions on how to alleviate teens' stress and panic at how far behind they feel. (Aug.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Robbins, author of the revealing *Pledged: The Secret Life of Sororities* (2004), investigates yet another troubling aspect of today's youth, the culture of high-school high achievers, a group to which she once belonged. To see if things had changed during the 10 years since she left high school, Robbins returned to her alma mater, one of the most competitive high schools in the country, to observe several students (juniors and seniors and one recent graduate, who was admitted to Harvard) as they balanced intense academic pressure, parental expectations, personal interests, social life, and their own drive to succeed. What she discovered is no surprise: the welfare of the individual has taken a backseat to academic success. Nor is her call for "massive change of both attitudes and educational policies" new. That said, it's difficult to ignore her perspectives on such issues as the influence of the SAT or the day-to-day struggles of the kids, who can't rest until

they "outwit, outplay, and outlast" the competition. An addendum directed to parents, schools officials, counselors, and students sets benchmarks for activists who want things to change.

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Sadly, this book did not provide any new insights or much information of interest to this reader. I purchased it having gone through the college admissions process with our two kids during the past couple of years. (Mom & Dad were lucky enough to graduate from a super-selective, super-endowed university in the "H-Y-P-S" category, way back in the late 70s, but both parents fled the rat-race in our early 20s to pursue work we thought to be interesting & rewarding, rather than fanatically pursuing money, power, and prestige unto the grave.) While we appreciate the advantages and luxuries that such top schools can provide, and wanted our kids to enjoy them, we have never come close to being the caricatures described in this book, nor are our kids, who both attend great colleges and are enjoying what they have to offer. The book is written in the tone of a breathless "Cosmopolitan" feature article, and after reading the first few chapters and some skipping around the rest of the book, I simply found nothing that would compel me to keep reading it. The same points are made over and over, but no real insight or thoughtfulness comes through. A reader with any sophistication or experience of the issues explored in the book gets that "Overachieverism" -- a cumbersome term that is presumably the author's neologism -- is a pernicious thing. "AP Frank" -- the stereotypical Asian nerd who takes every possible AP class, and aces them all, and gets into Harvard, with his monstrosly overbearing Korean mother breathing down his neck every inch of the way from the womb to Harvard Yard, is such a caricature that one wonders if the young man really exists, or is just a composite character. Having just run this gauntlet with our kids, I want to know what the gatekeepers and other persons in a position to lead us out of the current rat-race-tocracy are doing to address the problem, which is really a deeply-rooted cultural phenomenon. It has developed since the most selective universities turned the corner in the 60s from being old-boys clubs for families of multi-generational wealth, to being the allegedly more meritocratic institutions of today. In so doing, we've traded one set of problems for another. I happened to become close friends with Harvard Law's dean of admissions after she read a satire on law school admissions I wrote for my college newspaper. She was a wonderful woman of great wit and warmth -- and I wonder what she'd think of how the admissions game has evolved since her untimely death in the early 90s. I suspect she would have been a leader in trying to counteract the toxic trends that have developed in the intervening years. This reader would enjoy a thoughtful book that explores what

can be done to remedy the situation, but found nothing in this book but bromides and platitudes.

As the parent of a high school student who works very hard and is seldom truly satisfied with her academic performance, I can at least breathe a sigh of relief that she doesn't fall into the official category of an overachiever. Still, the stories of these students drew me in as both an objective and subjective observer. These kids and their stories are emotionally riveting and I found myself caring a great deal about each of them -- and as a parent also worrying not just a little bit about their physical, mental and emotional health -- and holding my breath in the hope that each student would truly achieve his or her goals without completely breaking down. I did find myself getting a little impatient with some of the students' various and too-numerous extra-curricular activities.

Supposedly, colleges are looking at a student's quality of life outside the classroom as well as in the classroom, but in the end, most of these activities seemed to do more harm than good. One of the students still did not get into her 1st choice school in spite of her busy life outside the classroom, and for the rest, the vast majority of those outside activities didn't figure significantly into the final outcomes. In fact, APFrank's story should show that a lot of outside activities are not all that necessary in the end. Most of the kids were not able to adequately cope with all their activities, missing classes, turning homework in late, failing exams, even; yet not one parent or counselor steps forward and says "Enough is enough." Their parents really dropped the ball in this instance. I did think the sampling of students was far too narrow, and I wished she had explored more in depth other high schools, both public and private. There are super-driven kids out there who don't have the same IQ power, or the same access to academic, financial and political resources these Whitman students do. I am certainly interested in knowing how less-fortunate students compensate and adjust their goals and expectations. OTOH, by choosing to follow a fewer number of students and in an environment with which she was much more familiar, Ms. Robbins is able to communicate her understanding and empathy and go into more depth behind-the-scenes with their individual stories. To be fair, she does choose quite a few different types of students, those who are driven from within and those who are pressured by outside expectations. Unfortunately, the follow-ups on the students' post high school lives that Ms. Robbins claims is available on her website are missing. She may have had very good intentions as the book went to press, but she was unable to deliver. There is only one student follow up available on her website. Still, I think it's a mistake to assume that super-driven, overachieving students is some kind of current "epidemic." There are no more of these obsessive students now than there were 30 years ago when I was in high school. I knew quite a few of them, even if I wasn't one myself. What makes their stories stand out more now is the fact

that more kids are attending college now than ever have in the past, and as a result, colleges and universities at all levels have become more expensive and more selective than ever. Actually, I think the LACK of performance-oriented achievers is a bigger concern. Too many kids these days think that they deserve high academic rewards for little or no work whatever. The kids feel entitled to top grades simply because they show up for class (and sometimes, even when they don't,) and not because they put in any effort to earn them. Nevertheless, I truly enjoyed this story at its face value and recommend it as interesting information. I have enjoyed several of Ms. Robbins other books as well and I intend to read the rest of them.

Not very informational. The whole book is teenagers complaining about their busy school calendar, not much to learn from.

I chose to read this book for two reasons: I am a high school teacher who works with driven kids, and I still am a driven kid myself. Robbins creates a readable book that highlights many aspects of this overachiever mentality that is so pervasive in our society. The book serves as both a cautionary tale and an indictment against our obsession with being the best in everything and how this has been passed on to our children. The book is well-researched for its publication date (I would love to see an updated version) and many of Robbins' sources were spot on in their predictions of more pressure and more problems for students as they attempt to navigate the pressures of achieving at peak levels in all areas of their lives.

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