

## The College Admission Frenzy: Lloyd Thacker

By Stephanie Levin,  
International High School Parent

On January 14, 300 families filed into Lick Wilmerding's auditorium to hear Lloyd Thacker, founder of the Education Conservancy in Portland, Oregon and author of *College Unranked*, speak on the college admission frenzy that has come to define the experience of getting into college, both for high school students and their parents.

While the majority attending were parents, a smattering of students from local high schools showed up, too. Thacker began the evening by asking teens in the audience what thoughts or emotions surfaced when they thought about getting into college. Intimidation, stress, grades, nervous, over-

whelmed, excited, angry, self-doubt were some of the words and feelings students shouted out. When Thacker asked the parents if they had had the same experience with getting into college, the unanimous response was no. Most parents recalled preparing to enter college as completely differ-

schools and admissions focus on the SAT tests, grades, the end result, not the educational process. Students have lost what I refer to as studenthood," said Thacker.

### The Parents

Many adults play a major role in increasing the stress on a student's life. It's understandable to want to have your student avoid mistakes and reflect well on you, but it's not about us, the parents, it's about the student. Thacker knows this from personal experience, both having a son in high

school and from college counseling high school students for 17 years. He shared some of the painful comments he heard in his high school counseling office— a father berating his son for getting only an 1100 on his SATs, parents pressuring a daughter to play sports to get into college, even though she'd lost interest in the sport, and one young student crying that she would be considered stupid if she did not get into a 'top' college.

Thacker reminded the audience softly that WE

*Continued on Page 2*

## Speaker Forum: Robert Sylvester

By Stephanie Levin  
International Parent

"We all meander into adulthood through the adolescent door. Some of us go through the door with ease, however, most of us stumble erratically over the threshold, stumbling being the rite of passage. Yet parents are continually mystified and surprised at their adolescent's foolish and destructive behavioral patterns," noted Robert Sylvester, Emeritus Professor of Education, University of Oregon.

On October 15, 2007, sponsored by the Parents' Coalition of Bay Area High Schools, Dr. Sylvester addressed a standing-room only capacity crowd in International's cafeteria. Dr. Sylvester spoke on the adolescent brain, specifically the neuroscience surrounding our understanding of the teen brain.

As a parent of a 10th grader, I can attest that the teenage brain is a roller coaster of unpredictability and incomprehensible behavior. But adolescence is also a transitional period neurologically. According to

*Continued on Page 2*



ent from the harrowing process of today's search.

"The message that students are hearing is that they must be perfect; they must go to the right college where grades and SATS count the most. Students hear that where they go will determine their worth, ultimately establishing their future in the job market," noted Thacker. "Instead of honing the essential catalysts, the qualities that make good education happen, such as curiosity, wonder, educational and personal values, parents,

### CONTENTS

• The College Admission Frenzy: Lloyd Thacker

• Speaker Forum: Robert Sylvester

• Book Review

# The College Admission Frenzy: Lloyd Thacker

Continued from Page 1

are not going to college; our teen is going to college.

“The less you do for your student, the more successful he or she will be. Focus less on your children’s grades at the dinner table and ask them what they are learning,” advised Thacker.

## Goals, Myths and Reality

The American goal used to be to go to college; now it is to go to the best college. Students and parents focus on top-ranked, prestigious universities and rely on magazine rankings to choose a college. Others hire consultants and take expensive classes. Anxious students spend countless hours creating the perfect application to the right college; others have turned cynical about the process, and some look at it as a mere game.

The myth that students won’t get into the college of their choice is rampant among high schoolers. Yet Thacker noted that approximately 70-80% of students do get admitted to the colleges of choice. In the most popular colleges 25% get in because of grades and hard work, not SAT scores. According to Thacker, deans of many schools acknowledge that the SAT scores are not a major factor in admissions. Nevertheless, the relatively new business of test prepping sought out by parents and teens is a burgeoning, billion dollar industry.

There are many good colleges, and many of them go unnoticed by students and parents seeking a spot in a prestigious college. However, Thacker told the audience that research has been unable to find a significant differ-

ence among colleges. “I’m not saying ignore the differences. But now the emphasis on branding and status displaces the role of the student in making the best choice for him or her. Move beyond marketing and think about the student.”

Get over the idea that there is ONE best school. It’s not true. Come up with a list of schools where your student would do well rather than focusing on only the top few. The student is the key ingredient when considering a college, not the institution. See your college counselor and get a list of colleges that may fit your student’s aspirations, personality and dreams. When it comes to higher education, it is the doing that matters, not where you go to do it.

## TIPS FOR STUDENTS

What can a student do to avoid the frenzy? The following are some of Thacker’s suggestions:

\*Limit applications to no more than six colleges.

\*Resist taking standardized test more than twice. Some kids do well on tests, but they are not really tools to evaluate learning.

\*Enjoy free time, get unplugged. This is the most plugged in generation, yet can also be the most disconnected emotionally.

\* Believe in yourself! No admissions director can define a student’s worth. The student is more important than the school. Put yourself in control and ask yourself,

What makes learning happen for you?

## What Makes a College Good?

What does make a good college? Thacker tossed this question to the audience and a flurry of answers shot back: interesting, intelligent professors, not having TAs teach classes, engaged students, diverse student body, choice in curriculum, sense of community, fun, good food, school spirit, encourages risk-taking, inexpensive, supportive mentoring. Ask your students what they’re looking for in a college, and then more profoundly, ask if their choice of schools matches their values.

## The Market Place

Marketing by colleges is at an all time high and is not going away any time soon. Education has become commercial, more about prestige and less about students. But Thacker insists that you as a family do have control over the admission frenzy. His book *College Unranked*, published by Harvard University Press, gives insight into the minds of college admissions deans as well as into what has happened to higher education. The Education Conservancy ([www.educationconservancy.org](http://www.educationconservancy.org)) is another source of information to assist students, families and counselors through the selection maze.

Thacker closed the evening by encouraging students to put themselves in the driver’s seat, not the back seat in this process, do their homework, ask questions and seek out the help they need. ■

# Speaker Forum:

Continued from Page 1

Sylwester, the developmental period of the adolescent brain trumps the brain’s development in the first three years of life.

New neuroscience research as well as MRIs that scan the teenage brain have shown that a crucial part of the brain undergoes extensive changes during puberty. This is precisely the same time that raging

***“Developmental concerts: The adolescent brain is very sensitive to pleasure and reward, but the impulse control systems aren’t mature. Adolescent brains are vulnerable to exploration”***

hormones, which are blamed for adolescent behavior, often wreck havoc. While the brain reaches 95 percent of its adult size by age six, the gray matter continues to thicken throughout childhood as the brain cells get extra connectors, not unlike a tree sprouting roots, branches, and twigs. In the frontal part of the brain, the area of the brain that involves judgment, organization, planning and strategiz-

# Robert Sylvester

ing, the thickening of the gray matter peaks around puberty. After this stage, the gray matter thins as excess connectors are pruned or eliminated.

Dr. Sylvester explained that the changes occurring in the brain in the first ten years happen in the rear hemisphere of the brain and include elementary survival skill and motor skills such as walking and speech. From age 10 to 20, the frontal lobes of the brain develop along with skills and processes related to decision making. During both

reward without its impulse control system intact. Thus at an inopportune time of their brain development, adolescents are vulnerable to exploration and are likely to experiment with alcohol and drugs.

You also may have also noticed that your adolescent isn't keen on routine. Parents might be more solution-oriented at a time when their teen-agers' brains aren't open to parents' solutions. Teen-agers want exactly what children desire when learning how to walk... to sprint

off on their own two feet, abandoning parental control. If a child falls, he or she gets up and gives it another go, often with minor bruises. The adolescent brain demands the same abandonment of parental control, although bad decisions can lead to much more than a bruise.

Here sits the conflict between many a parent and teenager. As potential risk-taking consequences increase, so does parental concern.

I did come away from Dr. Sylvester's talk with

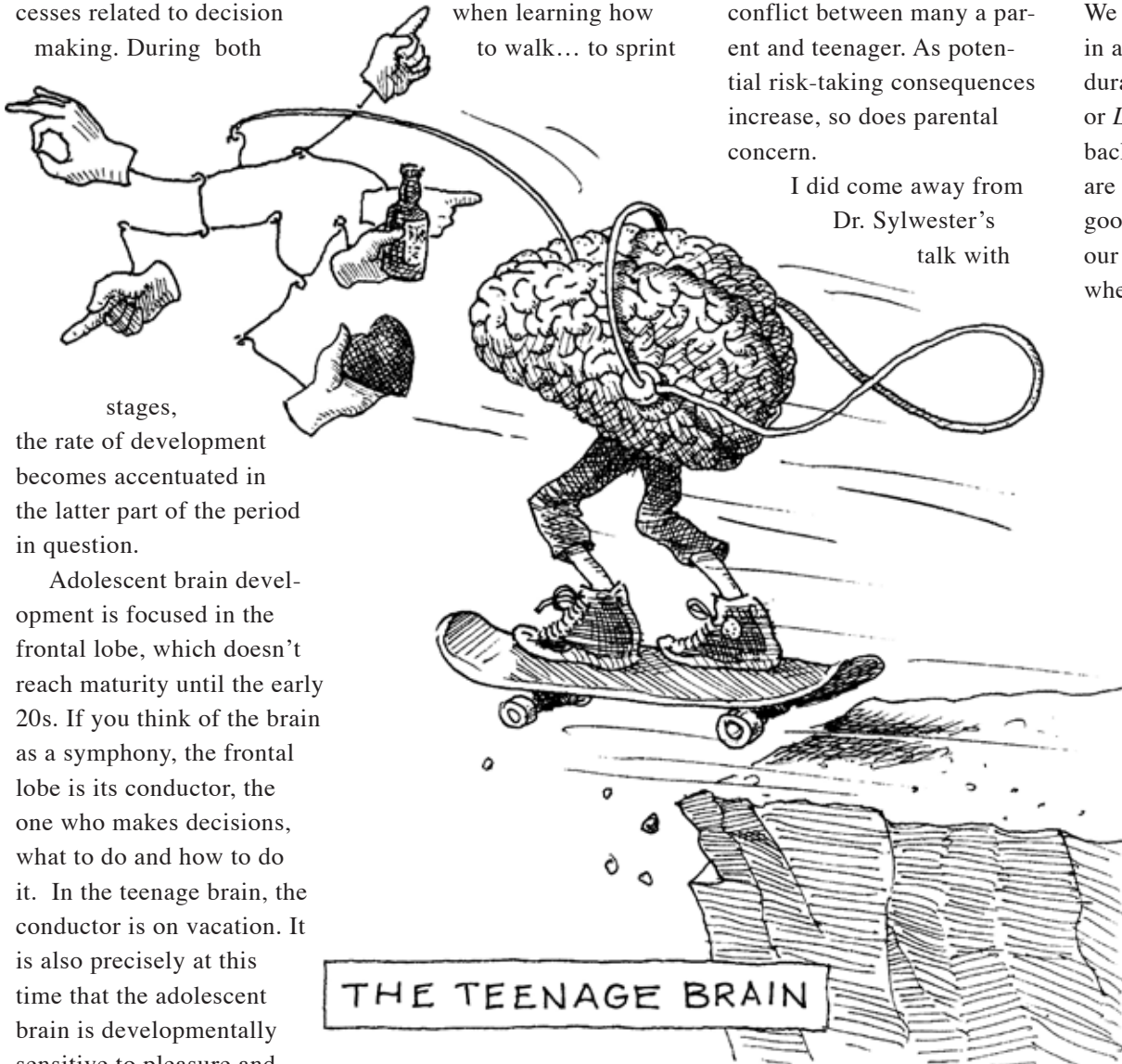
a tidbit of information that suggests that the adolescent brain is not only genetically driven but also culturally driven. The teenage brain responds to culture, like music, which can give adolescents a stronger sense of self. So etched is music on the brain that when adults hear songs from our adolescence, we're instantly propelled back to another era.

We might be sitting in traffic in a suit and tie, but for the duration of *Good Vibrations* or *Let It Be*, we're blasted back to the past, and chances are we're feeling pretty good. In much the same way our teenagers feel pleasure when listening to their iPods.

This plugged-in state can be aggravating to parents, but it's a way for teen-agers to connect with their own culture.

While Dr. Sylvester offered good background on adolescent brain development, his talk never got around to telling the audience how to manage adolescent impulses or moods during this stage of brain development. When should we as parents step back, increase control or put the brakes on? These questions remain unanswered, perhaps a topic for a future speaker. **P**

***“The maturation of the brain’s frontal lobes is far more important than previously realized”***



stages, the rate of development becomes accentuated in the latter part of the period in question.

Adolescent brain development is focused in the frontal lobe, which doesn't reach maturity until the early 20s. If you think of the brain as a symphony, the frontal lobe is its conductor, the one who makes decisions, what to do and how to do it. In the teenage brain, the conductor is on vacation. It is also precisely at this time that the adolescent brain is developmentally sensitive to pleasure and



## BOOK REVIEW

# Mindset by Carol Dweck, Ph.D

Random House, 2006 paper, \$14.95

By Diana Divecha

It took me only one chapter of Carol Dweck's, *Mindset*, to start blowing through ten obstacles in different corners of my life. It's the most inspiring antidote to feeling stuck since, well, caffeine.

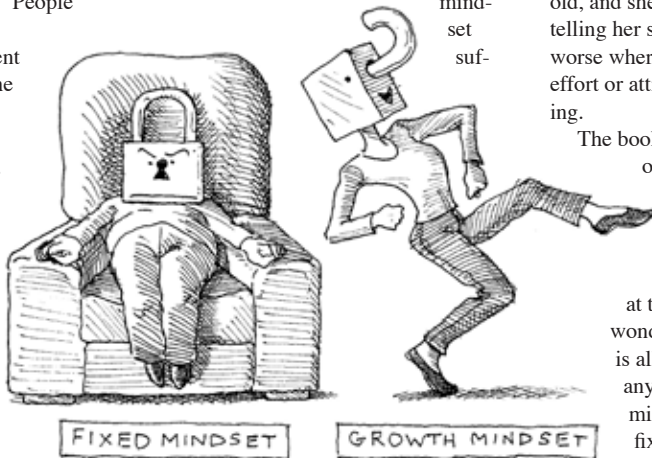
The views we hold about ourselves profoundly affect how we lead our lives, says Dweck, a Stanford psychologist who studies personality and motivation. Beliefs about our capabilities and qualities fall into two categories, she says. People either hold the view that our abilities are permanent and unchanging, what she calls a "fixed mindset," or that our qualities are the results of our efforts, a view she calls the "growth mindset." Dweck exhaustively researches the roots and tendrils of the two belief systems and finds that the mindsets lead to very different outcomes.

People who have a fixed mindset end up using their energy to protect their image of themselves. Believing that their performance defines them, they are undone by rejection and failure, and they shrink from challenge. They are fragile in the face of criticism and obstacles, preferring to blame others or even lie about their performance, and they have higher rates of depression and low self-esteem. Ultimately they limit their own achievements. People who have a growth mindset, on the other hand, know their strengths and weaknesses, strive to improve, and when encountering difficulties, will put out more effort. They tend to love a challenge and refuse to be defined by setbacks, instead seeing them as opportunities to learn and improve. They value process more than outcome and view themselves and others as works in progress, as developing, growing people. As a result, they unleash more energy toward their passions and ultimately achieve much more.

Dweck's findings on children's mindsets have important implications for parenting. She found, for example, that children with a fixed

mindset had more difficulty in the transition from elementary school to junior high: their school performance declined, they lost their zest for learning, self-esteem dropped, and they developed dysfunctional attitudes like blaming others when they didn't do well. In another study, Dweck looked at college students, of whom nearly half experience depression at some point. The depressed students with a

fixed  
mindset  
suffer



fered more: they ruminated, they tormented themselves with negative thoughts, they let work slide so it mounted and complicated their difficulties, and they tended to self-medicate with alcohol and drugs. On the other hand, those with a growth mindset expected they would turn around eventually, and they dragged themselves to classes to keep up in spite of how they felt. They took action, learned new coping strategies, and moved on.

Dweck describes other research on children that shows that the fixed mindset is at the heart of bullying, shyness, and some self-fulfilling prophecies. For example, young people who did poorly on tests because they believed stereotypes about their race or gender tended to be those with the fixed mindset. They allowed stereotypes to activate worry about their performance, which distracted them from the task at hand – whereas those with a growth mindset were more impervious to others' ideas about how they should do on tests.

The great news is that mindsets

are largely learned. Dweck found that when children were told they were smart they would temporarily be happy but then quickly became afraid of failure, developing a fixed mindset and shutting down. But kids who were complimented for their hard work and effort cultivated a growth mindset. Language that focused on the process, not the outcome, led to the better mindset. I checked this out with my 16-year old, and she vehemently agreed that telling her she's smart makes her feel worse whereas acknowledging her effort or attitude is more encouraging.

The book is an easy read, full of anecdotes and enough repetition to drive the point home. The two mindsets seem a little simplistic, dualistic at times, and the reader wonders whether attitude is all there is and if there's any downside to a growth mindset, or an upside to a fixed mindset. But those mitigating questions are not explored. Still the research

results were strong enough for me to make a mental list of the problems I could solve by changing my mindset. And the book is a wake-up call to be careful about how we talk to children in this anxiety-ridden, performance-driven climate of parenting.

As my own daughter approaches her SATs and college applications this spring, I have a few more tools to help her navigate through the scores, evaluations, acceptances and rejections that will be handed down. It's clear after reading this book that one of the most important qualities for success that we can cultivate in our kids is not accomplishment in certain areas as much as this more interior quality of a growth mindset. It readies them for the setbacks and failures they will inevitably face and is a powerful catalyst for unleashing their full potential as they take over the reins to their own lives.

Diana Divecha, Ph.D. is a developmental psychologist in Berkeley and has two teenage daughters. Her essays appear in *Something that Matters* and *Wednesday Writers*. **P**

### Coalition Mission

"To support, educate, and inspire parents of adolescents in order to promote the health and safety of our youth."

Please direct your inquires regarding the Coalition to Martha Mangold  
phone: 415.648.8149,  
email: Maggio21@pacbell.net

### Coalition Representatives

Rep Coordinator  
Sue Doyle  
415.927.5967  
sdoyle@mcds.org

Mollie Baron  
*The Bay School*  
Martha Mangold  
SOTA

Patricia Holden  
Susan Golden  
Branson  
Jay Williams  
Mikiko Huang  
University  
High School

Susan Doyle  
Ellen Stein  
Drew School  
Frish Brandt  
Cynthia Koster  
The Urban School

Mara O'Day  
Stephanie Levin  
French American  
International  
Cynthia Koster  
Frish Brandt  
Urban

Theresa Hong  
The Hamlin School  
High School

Mimi Downes  
Diana Divecha  
Lick-Wilmerding  
Charlene Davis  
Ellen Stephens  
SF Waldorf  
High School

Wendy Brown  
The Nueva School  
Charlene Davis  
Ellen Stephens  
Interim Members

### Newsletter Staff

Editor  
Elizabeth Fishel  
Illustrator  
Alek Kardas

Layout  
Joshua Conley  
Contributors  
Stephanie Levin  
Diana Divecha

Readers are encouraged to submit letters to the editor, ideas for articles or articles themselves.

Annual subscription rate is \$25.