

## I learned nothing at one of NYC's elite high schools

By [Hannah Milic](#)

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High-school grad Hannah Milic says creativity is more important than an "elite" education.

Last spring, as I sat waiting for a friend to emerge from the Lab High School in Chelsea, my attention shifted to a group of sobbing middle schoolers. I discreetly approached them, curious as to what could have possibly happened.

“I can’t go home, I didn’t get into Bronx Science!” wept one of the girls. “My mom will kill me!”

“I got into everything but Stuyvesant! What am I supposed to do?” whimpered another.

As the dramatic crying jags continued, I sighed and shook my head.

At the time, I was a senior at Beacon High School, one of the city’s top schools. I had tried for two years to get in, facing an interview and writing a personal essay, competing against 5,000 middle-schoolers for 200 coveted spots. I desperately wanted to go to Beacon, impressed by the school’s curriculum and seeming devotion to

creativity and individualism. After years of attending a French school, I wanted an American high-school experience.

I got in, but by my final year I was miserable. I was so swamped with deadlines, test scores and essays that I never took time to reflect on who I was or who I wanted to become. After long days in the classroom, I came home to several hours of homework every night. Many of my teachers were of little or no help when I struggled with assignments, and when I had simply stopped attending class for days at a time no one even seemed to notice. In my senior year, the principal had no idea who I was.

When I did go to school, I watched my 16- and 17-year-old schoolmates pop Adderall to finish their essays and increase their SAT scores.

Many had already developed serious caffeine addictions at 14 years old. You had to cheat the system in any possible way you could to get to where you thought you wanted to be.

“It’s not going to matter in the end where you start off,” I heard myself telling the middle-schoolers. “You can go to the best school in the city and still not make it to where you want to be. Don’t stress too much.” My speech had little effect. The kids looked up at me with their tear-stained faces, clearly unable to comprehend what I could possibly be talking about.

When I did go to school, I watched my 16- and 17-year-old schoolmates pop Adderall to finish their essays and increase their SAT scores.

How could they know that I was a month away from graduating from Beacon and I felt like a complete failure?

Before I arrived at Beacon, I studied at the Lycée Français, a top French school. By the time I applied to Beacon as an eager and naive 14-year-old, I spoke five languages fluently. I was studying Mandarin and Latin and reading Aristotle. I had even recited Cyrano de Bergerac’s famous “nose” soliloquy to a packed school auditorium. In French.

But the same afternoon that I met the crying middle-schoolers, I had just emerged from my college counselor’s office with few prospects. I hadn’t filled the quotas. I didn’t have the right test scores largely because I felt supremely ripped off. I didn’t really learn anything of consequence at Beacon, not anything that would benefit me in the real world. I had no idea how a mortgage worked, what to do with an income-tax form, what having a credit card entailed.

“How about community college?” the guidance counselor asked cheerfully as I stared at the feel-good quotes pasted on the walls of her office.

Everything fell apart but also started to come together. “I can’t go on,” wrote Samuel Beckett. “I’ll go on.”

I graduated from Beacon — the toughest experience of my life — but I didn’t attend my prom or even go to the graduation ceremony, because high school had meant nothing to me. By the constructs of the static, 19th century model of education that promotes linear thinking and ignores anything out-of-the-box, I should have felt like a failure, but I knew I wasn’t.

The real failure is high school itself and the panel of baby boomers obsessed with graduation rates and pushing kids into the Ivy Leagues where they will likely be paying off their student debts for life. They do this at the risk of ignoring the diverse, complex, vibrant and innovative generation of kids — my generation — that is already making its impact on the world.

How about administrators and teachers start helping kids get more internships and open them up to different ways of thriving without a university degree?

Last week, New York City middle-schoolers finally had to look at the high schools that had accepted them — whether they're "elite" or not — and decide which one to attend.

Kids, I'm here to tell you that if you're not going to your first choice, or your second, or your third, don't worry. Just follow your creativity, individualism and drive. Those of you who are hungry to make an impact on the world will do so, regardless of the score on your report cards.

As for the grown-ups? Maybe it's finally time to let us teach you something for a change.

*Hannah Milic, 18, is the daughter of Post reporter Isabel Vincent. She is halfway through a gap year, traveling and practicing jiu-jitsu, and planning to go to college in Europe.*

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