

Grawemeyer Awards[®]

Study of how to better U.S. high schools wins education award

How can American high schools move away from rote learning and testing and help students become critical thinkers ready to take on the challenges of modern life?

Educators Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine, who spent six years researching the issue at 30 U.S. high schools, have co-won the 2020 Grawemeyer Award in Education for ideas set forth in their book, “In Search of Deeper Learning: The Quest to Remake the American High School.” Harvard University Press published the prize-winning book in April.

[Mehta](#) is a professor at Harvard University Graduate School of Education. [Fine](#) prepares teachers at High Tech High Graduate School of Education, which is linked with a network of diverse charter schools in San Diego.

“Powerful learning occurs when learners are trying to do something consequential and when they see purpose in what they’re doing,” they argue. “The core problem is that the way American society organizes schooling does not align very well with what we know about learning.”

To learn most effectively, they concluded, students must have regular opportunities to gain meaningful knowledge and skills, connect to their learning on a personal level and use it to produce something original.

Mehta and Fine, who observed classrooms for hundreds of hours and interviewed more than 300 students, parents, teachers and school administrators, also found extracurricular activities and elective classes can offer additional ways for students to experience deep learning.

“High schools often become different places after the final bell,” they said. “We saw students who are passive learners in core classes show real purpose in taking non-required classes, becoming involved in school clubs and pursuing student leadership opportunities.”

Schools should start by slowing down, giving students more choice over what they learn and empowering them to work in subjects that interest them, they said.

“Mehta and Fine have provided a fresh, in-depth view of learning environments that offers hope for those seeking to create deeper learning in academic settings,” said award director Marion Hambrick.