



Perfectionism vs. Excellence

by Mrs. Angie Copetillo

Learning is joyful hard work—as is life. This is as true for students as it is for anyone. True learning requires active thinking. It is impossible to learn complacently. Recognizing the work of learning is essential to growing through it and enjoying it. Education is also more than merely transferring knowledge from one mind to another, for the mind is only one aspect of the human person: we are also body and soul; will and affections; loves and hatreds. A Habersham education, therefore, is not merely work and is not merely a matter of the mind; rather it is a matter of the soul. Author and theologian G.K. Chesterton said, “*Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to the next.*”

The Habersham mission takes into account the soul of each student, tackling an ambitious and complex mission as we seek to cultivate students as *image bearers of God and become more fully human*. At each grade level, then, teachers are attune to their students, understanding everything from the playful needs of five-year-olds, to the emotional complexities of thirteen-year-olds, to the independence-seeking struggles of seventeen-year-olds. Through all of these needs, the work and joy of learning remains. The 17th-century philosopher John Locke demonstrated his understanding of this by devoting nearly 80 pages of his treatise on education to describing the physical toils of education and how students must expect it.

For all of these reasons, I often chime, *learning is a process*. This is not a race. The goal is *growth*: cultivation of moral and mental habits, mastery of skills and knowledge. Yet, many parents tell me their child is a perfectionist, as if this is a mostly positive trait. Though excellence often requires growth in precision, perfection is unattainable. And in fact, the pursuit of perfection can keep students (and adults!) from accomplishing all God created us to do.

Perfectionism combined with what is commonly known as the College Arms Race can be particularly destructive when this is set as the end goal. As one university president noted: *It [is] unseemly to treat education as a “product.” Education belongs in a realm apart from shoes, smartphones, and salsa...It’s clear that a new sort of arms race grips higher education — an ever-escalating spiral of test scores and fee increases, ambitious capital programs, and student loan woes — that can’t help but color decisions that are complex and non-definitive.*

To reach our goal and cultivate growth, we need to help students and ourselves transform from self-centered to Christ-centered and understand learning as a process with rewards far greater than top tier SAT scores and college acceptances. These accomplishments are good, but they aren't the end goal.

I am grateful to Mrs. Doreen Howell from Regents School of Austin for first pointing me to these important points. The following information was taken from the book, *How to Live with a Perfectionist* by David Stoop. Think about it and maybe you can help yourself or someone else, escape the trap of perfectionism. *Remember, perfectionism is about self; excellence is about others.*

A Perfectionist

1. Is idealistic: "It should be . . ."
2. Strives for the impossible
3. Is motivated to avoid the negative
and has a fear of failure
4. Focuses on the product
5. Expects the best in comparison to others
6. Views life as a threat
7. Hates criticism
8. Remembers mistakes and
dwells on them
9. Values self by what he/she does

Perfectionism results in:

- a. Disappointment
- b. Condemnation
- c. Frustration
- d. Failure

A Person of Excellence

1. Is realistic: "It is . . ."
2. Strives for the possible
3. Is motivated by a desire for success
and strives for the positive
4. Focuses on the process
5. Desires best for self
6. Views life as a challenge
7. Welcomes criticism
8. Corrects mistakes and learns
from them
9. Values self by who they are

Excellence results in:

- a. Accomplishment
- b. Acceptance
- c. Fulfillment
- d. Success