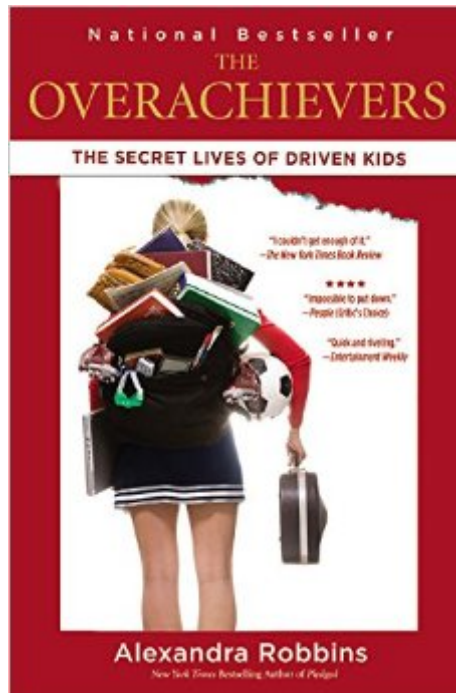


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# The Overachievers: The Secret Lives Of Driven Kids



## 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

The author's writing style does an excellent job of bringing these young people to life, and it seems easier to feel sympathy for these youngsters than it was to empathize with the rather bitchy young adults she described in "Pledged". But *Walt Whitman* is not only a school for highly achieving, stressed-out, Ivy League strivers. It is also a school for average kids, quiet kids, goths, drug users, dope sellers, artists, devoutly religious kids, and single-pointed nerds who are the farthest thing from the polished, well-rounded, resume kings and queens portrayed in this narrative. At least, it was when I attended the school and graduated nearly twenty years ago, and to a large extent, it probably still is today. The average students are rarely featured in the narrative, except in terms of their relationships with the overachievers, but it would have been interesting had the author focused a little more on how an elite public school like *Walt Whitman* shapes the expectations of its average kids. Many of these youngsters probably benefitted from exposure to high achievers, particularly since they may have shared at least a few AP classes with them (not every AP student is a classic overachiever). But many of the average youngsters also feel the same stress that overachievers experience, along with a greater sense of inadequacy when comparing their modest achievements and SAT scores against the gold standard established by *Walt Whitman*'s top twenty percent. Some of these average kids may deliberately model their academic and social behavior to contrast with the norm established by the school's dominant elite as a way of establishing their own identities, but whether this helps or harms them in the long run is a topic the author didn't get around to addressing.

The *Overachievers* profiles nine students at one of the top public schools in the country. Most of the students are from wealthy families and do not need to worry about how they will pay for college. In fact, most of them are not actually worried about getting into college so much as getting into the Right College. You know, Harvard, Yale, Stanford. So why would I care about these kids? They have it made, and if they are stressing out about whether they are accepted into Princeton or have to settle for Duke, well boo hoo. And yet I found I was very interested in what happened to these

students. Alexandra Robbins (who attended this very high school and then Middlebury College and then graduate school at Yale) tells the stories from the students' perspectives. In between finding out what is motivating these teenagers, Robbins explores a host of relevant subjects: peer pressure, family pressure, No Child Left Behind, the SAT and AP exams, prescription drugs (especially Ritalin), teenage sleep patterns, college rankings, education in other countries, teen suicide rates, gap year, cheating, and more. Any of these subjects would make a compelling study on its own, but taken altogether, you begin to understand, and even sympathize with, these overprivileged students. Several of these subjects have already been excellently covered by books such as *The Cheating Culture* by David Callahan, *My Freshman Year* by Rebekah Nathan, and *The Winner-Take-All Society* by Robert Frank. Obviously, *The Overachievers* isn't just about high school students. It's also about their parents, the schools, politics, and money. It turns out that what motivates these kids most is fear. Fear of failure, of disappointing their families and friends, of not getting a great job, of not making scads of money.

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