Sent: Thu, 27 Jan 2011 12:21:43 -0500
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From: Vogel, Matthew A.
Sent: Thursday, January 27, 2011 12:19 PM
To: Finer, Jonathan J.
Subject:

Larry Summers vs. Tiger Mom
By Jon Hilsenrath
Wall Street Journal

Larry Summers likes to view himself as a "hard ass" — his own words — when it comes to educating children. As the demanding president of Harvard University early last decade, he often pushed his own faculty to be tougher with kids. "I found myself fairly frequently saying things that people found to be outrageous," he said at a dinner on the sidelines of Davos on Wednesday. "I would say, 'I think you have to decide whether achievement is the route to self-esteem or whether self-esteem is the route to achievement. I think you guys think self-esteem is the route to achievement, and I think you're wrong.'"

So Mr. Summers, who has returned as a professor at Harvard after two years as President Barack Obama's top economic adviser, found himself momentarily flustered when asked to speak at the dinner debate with Yale Law School's "Tiger Mom," Amy Chua, whose memoir of her own hard-nosed child-rearing tactics has spurred an international discussion about pushing kids for straight A's and high academic achievement. His own children would be shocked to hear it, Mr. Summers said, but maybe Ms. Chua is wrong.

"In a world where things that require discipline and steadiness can be done increasingly by computers, is the traditional educational emphasis on discipline, accuracy and successful performance and regularity really what we want?" he asked. Creativity, he said, might be an even more valuable asset that educators and parents should emphasize. At Harvard, he quipped, the A students tend to become professors and the C students become wealthy donors.

"It is not entirely clear that your veneration of traditional academic achievement is exactly well placed," he said to Ms. Chua. "Which two freshmen at Harvard have arguably been most transformative of the world in the last 25 years?" he asked. "You can make a reasonable case for Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, neither of whom graduated." Demanding tiger moms, he said, might not be very supportive of their kids dropping out of school.

There is a second issue, he said. "People on average live a quarter of their lives as children. That's a lot. It's important that they be as happy as possible during those 18 years. That counts too."

Ms. Chua was genial, despite the tough tiger image. She's been taken aback by the reaction to

her book, “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,” which she emphasized was a memoir that only took her a couple of months to write, not a thoroughly researched study or “how-to” document. She added people seem to have missed that it was meant to be funny in places that might seem over-the-top to readers, a self-parody of her own approach when her children were young. ”I certainly never expected to talk about my parenting skills, or lack thereof, at the World Economic Forum,” she said.

She also notes that she changed as her kids got older. “There is a point in my book where my daughter rebels against my parenting, and I pull back because I don’t want to lose her,” she said. China, too, is looking for ways to introduce more creativity into its education system, which she says is a good thing.

Still, she stuck to her guns. She is a very happy person, despite her own strict upbringing. She sees the same in students who come from families with tough upbringings. In fact, with all of the attention she’s getting at Davos, and the book sales that are coming with the furor, she seemed especially happy last night.