

The Adolescent Learner Pages 33-37

Help for Stressed Students

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Through creative strategies, secondary schools can reduce academic stress and make learning more meaningful.

A high school counselor boasts about the “best and brightest” students in her school. They are motivated and diligent. They enroll in honors and advanced placement courses and achieve high grades and test scores. They play sports, participate in theater and music programs, and serve as community volunteers and school leaders. They “do everything and do it well.”

But recent research shows a different, more troubling view. To get ahead, many of these high-achieving students feel compelled to compromise their values and manipulate the system. They admit to scheming, lying, and cheating to get the grades they believe they need for future success. They aren't engaged in meaningful learning experiences. Instead they are busy, in their own words, “doing school.”

“Doing School”

This alternate picture of high-achieving adolescents emerged from an in-depth yearlong study of five motivated and successful students—two boys and three girls from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds—documented in *“Doing School”: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students* (Pope, 2001). Other large-scale research and news reports have echoed the study's findings (see Hardy, 2003; Roeser & Eccles, 1998).

Instead of thinking deeply about the content of their courses, students who are “doing school” focus on managing their workloads and cutting corners. They memorize facts and figures just long enough to ace the exams and then move on to the next set of tasks. They form classroom alliances to win favors from teachers and administrators, who wield great power as they dole out grades and write college recommendation letters. As one student notes,

People don't go to school to learn. They go to get good grades, which brings them to college, which brings them the high-paying job, which brings them to happiness, so they think. But basically, grades are where it's at. (Pope, 2001, p. 4)

In addition to the stresses usually associated with adolescence—negotiating relationships with parents and peers and dealing with the many changes of puberty—these college-bound students are often overwhelmed with school, home, and work responsibilities. One honor student in the study takes several advanced placement courses and is involved in

numerous school clubs, including School Site Council, Mock Trial, and the Spanish Club. She plays field hockey and badminton and performs in the school band. She reflects on her hectic high school experience:

I sometimes have two or three days where I only get two hours of sleep per night. I see lots of my friends burned out, but I don't have time to worry about this. . . . Some people see health and happiness as more important than grades and college; I don't. I feel compelled to compete because we have a really smart class, and I am competing with them to get into college. (p. 34)

This student and others like her call themselves “robo-students.” They drag themselves through the school day, exhausted and living in a constant state of stress. Some sacrifice sleep, healthy eating, and exercise to pursue high grade point averages. Others suffer from anxiety and depression as they compare themselves with their peers and realize that a *B* grade, once considered good, may now be a liability. They know that more students than ever are applying to selective colleges, and their guidance counselors advise them to take the most rigorous courses available and to get the highest test scores possible to gain admission to these schools.

The students regret the frantic pace and the sacrifices they make, but they see no other way to achieve their goals and meet the often unrealistic expectations of their parents, teachers, peers, and community. Now more than ever before, pressure for high achievement in school has become a significant risk factor for adolescent mental and physical health, academic integrity, and school engagement.

Promising Initiatives

How can schools address the causes and consequences of academic stress and improve the health and well-being of their students? The efforts of one public high school in New York and a research-based intervention at Stanford University yield some strategies.

A Schoolwide Plan

Many students at the Wheatley School, a public high school in the affluent community of Old Westbury, New York, are carbon copies of the five students profiled in *Doing School*. In a course taught by the principal, students used their journal entries to passionately describe the pressure of living in a community that expects all students to go to top-notch four-year colleges. They wrote about plagiarism, sleep deprivation, and test anxiety as well as the use of expensive tutors, therapists, caffeine, and prescription pills. One student described the pressure as “never-ending”:

There is no margin of error. When someone gets a *C* on a quiz, they cry. I received a *C+* in Spanish. My parents were screaming at me, and they said I should get a tutor. They have no idea what it is like to go to school—how much pressure it is.

In response to these concerns, the school gave copies of *Doing School* to each faculty member and all interested students and parents and provided time during the school day

for extensive discussion and debate about student stress. Within a few months, the school community agreed to make reducing stress on students a leading goal. A team of faculty members, students, parents, and administrators then developed an action plan that began with seven tasks:

- Measure the level of stress for students and faculty using multiple survey instruments.
- Address the topic of stress in one or more of Wheatley's Community Dialogue Nights.
- Reduce testing during the midterm period.
- Continue a faculty dialogue on ways to reduce student stress.
- Create a new intervention program for students who do poorly in school because they cannot deal with the competition and stress.
- Explore the idea of making lunch mandatory for all students. (Almost 20 percent of students were using the lunch period to take an additional academic course.)
- Hire consultants to teach faculty how to incorporate stress reduction activities into their classrooms.

The school is currently implementing each of these activities. In addition, teachers have begun to announce homework assignments well in advance, reduce the amount of homework they give (especially on weekends), and offer more extra-credit opportunities. Teachers have also started giving students more choice about the items that they answer on tests and about the test scores that will count toward their final grades. Additional recommendations that have emerged from community meetings include giving more long-term, meaningful assignments, such as culminating unit projects that focus on mastery of skills; making vacations homework-free; teaching students ways to relax in stressful situations; and educating parents about the effects of stress and pressure.

The long-term success of these strategies remains to be seen. Almost two years after discussions began and only a few months into the implementation of the changes, some students continue to report schedules that leave little time for sleep and a belief that a grade of *B* or even *B+* is akin to an *F*. One 10th grader wrote,

Every kid in our school strives to be the perfect well-rounded student, and to excel at everything. Juggling sports, school, clubs, and various other extracurriculars, it's hard to fit sleep into our busy schedules. Right now as I am typing this, I still have two labs, math, and social studies homework to do.

Some positive results, however, are clear. Staff members now recognize the stress problem as real and feel more empathy toward the students. As all parties become more aware of the issue, teachers and administrators feel empowered to make incremental changes that have the potential to reduce stress—or at least make it more manageable.

A University Initiative

Another promising initiative is under way at Stanford University, where an interdepartmental advisory board responded to nationwide reports of increased anxiety and depression among college students (Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton, & Benton, 2003). The board created the Stressed Out Students (SOS) project, an intervention to

counter academic stress at the middle school and high school levels. Inspired in part by Wheatley's approach, the board developed a plan based on stakeholder dialogue and site-based school reform efforts.

Following a public forum on academic stress to educate schools and community members about the severity and scope of the problem, Stanford hosted 15 local school teams of principals and other administrators, teachers, parents, and students for a one-day workshop devoted to fostering health, school engagement, and academic integrity. Each school team then met at least twice during the summer with an SOS coach to discuss the root causes of academic stress at its school and to develop plans for change. In November, the school teams came together again to share success stories, to determine benchmarks for assessing progress, and to problem-solve together to improve change efforts.

Multiple Strategies

From the experiences of Wheatley and the input from many other schools involved in the SOS project, we offer the following collection of strategies that schools are implementing to reduce student stress and increase engagement.

Collaborate with students and parents. Several schools in the SOS project have noted the benefits of having student and parent representation on their stress reduction teams. Many schools have surveyed students and parents about issues related to academic stress, including student workload, homework time, extracurricular activities, sleep habits, course expectations, and college admissions. The schools use this information to identify the scope of the problem, to effect further change, and to determine progress each year.

Improve students' use of time. Many schools have enacted changes related to students' use of time by eliminating mid-semester exams, scheduling final exams before vacation, or eliminating summer assignments to give students some real time off. Some schools are using test and project calendars across grade levels to prevent scheduling conflicts that force students to take several tests or turn in several major projects on the same day. Other schools have created homework guidelines that ask teachers to consider the purpose of each assignment and to track how long each student takes to complete the assignment. Several schools are moving toward block scheduling, realizing that the traditional seven-period day causes undue stress on students as they race from class to class and struggle each night to complete homework for seven courses. And some schools have implemented delayed starts once a week to allow students some extra sleep time and to give teachers some extra planning or professional development time.

Develop mental health initiatives. Schools are working to provide counseling services that prevent stress instead of just reacting to the many cases of anxious and depressed students. Counselors teach classes on time management, stress reduction, yoga, and meditation. Another stress reducer is an advisory system in which teachers work with 15–20 students during a homeroom or tutorial period. Students and adults get to know one another well and can identify appropriate resources for help as problems arise.

Redefine success. To address the assumptions that underlie their competitive climates, schools need to ask themselves, What does real learning look like? How do we define success in school and life? Are we communicating these broad definitions of success to our students?

As a result of reflecting on such questions, some schools in the SOS project are changing the way they publicly honor students so that they celebrate academic excellence without making all students feel unhealthy pressure to compete for the same goals. Many schools have stopped ranking students by GPA or awarding valedictorians. Instead of posting pictures of students who earn a 4.0 grade point average or listing the names of the colleges that seniors will attend, some schools honor students who represent a broader definition of success, such as students who serve their school and community, who excel in athletics or the arts, or who demonstrate dedication to a cause or passion.

Raise parents' awareness. Because unreasonable parental expectations can fuel higher levels of stress, schools have instituted parent education evenings to address the pressures that well-meaning families place on their children. School counselors explain to parents that college should not be considered a status symbol but should represent the best fit between the student and the school. They encourage parents to work with their children to assess which activities and courses to take, keeping in mind the students' interests and passions, not just university admissions criteria.

Change curriculum and assessment policies. Finally, schools are making real strides toward engaging students and fostering motivation. Studies show that students are more likely to engage with school when they care about the subject matter, see that it connects to their lives in some way, and have some autonomy over their studies (see Intrator, 2004). Teachers are developing curriculum around student interests and are replacing traditional unit exams with culminating projects that allow for authentic assessment. Instead of relying mostly on lecture-based instruction, teachers can vary their techniques to include more student-centered approaches, such as small-group discussions and dramatic enactments.

Although difficult to put into place, these classroom-level changes are an integral part of reducing student stress and fostering academic integrity and engagement.

Creating a More Balanced Culture

It won't be easy to change the culture in school and society that places a premium on academic achievement and competition. Yet the experiences of the Wheatley School and the Stressed Out Students project show that when schools work together with parents and students to recognize the problem of academic stress and address its root causes, the process of reforming schools can begin.

The school change strategies described here, however, can only go so far in changing the culture of unhealthy competition in our schools. Colleges and universities need to join

this conversation and send different messages to our high school students. Some, like Stanford and MIT, have already grappled with this issue and made changes in their admissions practices. For instance, MIT now limits the number of extracurricular activities a candidate may list on the application and asks students to write an essay about what gets them excited. Stanford posts a letter on its admissions Web site explaining that it will not necessarily admit the students who take the most AP courses.

Changes like these may be outside the purview of K–12 schools. But if we want lasting, fundamental reform, everyone in society must work toward creating a healthier culture for our adolescent learners.

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