

Stressed Out Students

By Tasneem Karimbhai

Denise Pope, a Stanford University School of Education lecturer and founder of Stressed Out Students (SOS), asked parents at the February 2nd Parents' Coalition event to define success and got these answers: happiness, balance, confidence, knowing and liking yourself.

Ask students their definition of the same word, said Pope, and you'll get these answers: good grades, high SAT scores, getting into Ivy League colleges and making lots of money.

The difference between the two, she says, is that the adults are measuring success by internal values whereas the students are using external measures. And yet, this is the message delivered to students daily by parents and teachers. They feel pressured to succeed in school and get good grades and high test scores at all costs.

At the same time, there is pressure on teachers to make sure no child is left behind and all students graduate. There

is also pressure on college administrators to increase the number of applicants to their schools so that more students will be rejected and the colleges will seem more desirable. Pressured parents are overworked, trying to raise successful families and rushing their over-scheduled children from one activity to another.

"It's not just one thing, the whole system is broken," said Pope the author of *Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed-Out, Materialistic and Miseducated Students*.

Students don't go to school today to learn, Pope said, they are just 'doing school' – memorizing just enough information to pass the tests, not engaging in depth with the subject, not enjoying their activities. "School is lifeless," one student who was taking 5 AP classes and over 20 after school activities told Pope. In fact, the two words students most associated

with school were 'bored' followed by 'tired'.

Some statistics shed further light:

- **Extra Curricular Activities:** More than 85% of students do one or more after school activity. 20% of high school and 8% of middle school students do 3 hours of extracurricular activities per night.

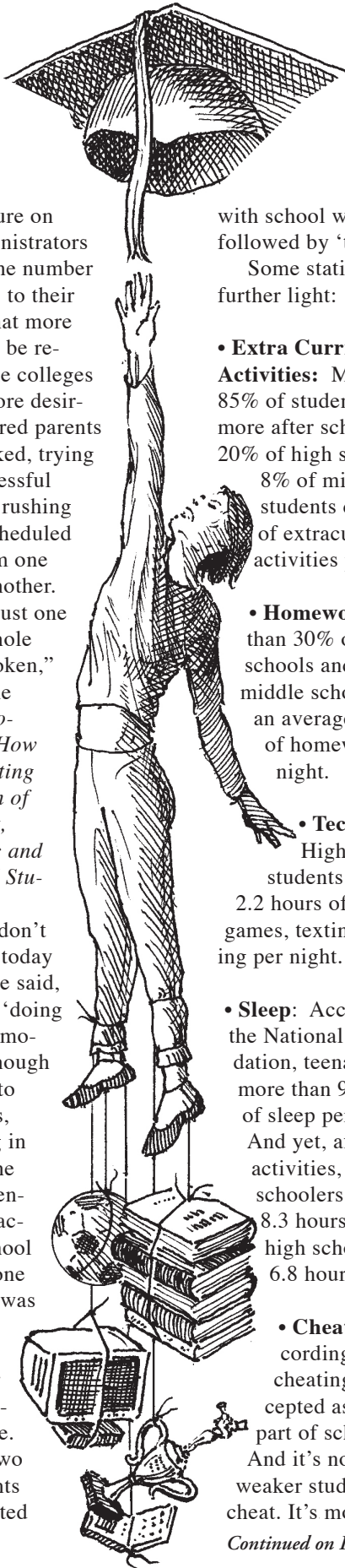
- **Homework:** More than 30% of high schools and 15% of middle schools require an average 3.5 hours of homework per night.

- **Technology:** High school students average 2.2 hours of computer games, texting, and IM-ing per night.

- **Sleep:** According to the National Sleep Foundation, teenagers need more than 9.25 hours of sleep per night. And yet, after all their activities, middle schoolers get about 8.3 hours/night and high schoolers about 6.8 hours/night.

- **Cheating:** According to Pope, cheating is accepted as a normal part of school life. And it's not just the weaker students who cheat. It's more likely

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Brave New World, Yes, But With Trust, It's Back to Basics: The Annual Teen Panel Presentation

By Mikiko Huang

On a recent March evening at SF Waldorf High School, the Parents' Coalition sponsored its annual public convening of the Teen Panel on this year's topic, "Privacy, Trust and Social Networking." Marilyn Gradeck and James O'Dowd continued to co-facilitate this year's panel of eight teens from public, parochial and independent high schools. Much of the discussion was in a Q and A format.

Q: How important is privacy to teens?

A: One 18-year-old panelist said that privacy was her right as a person. On principle, she didn't want to be forced to share everything, even if she had nothing to hide. Another panelist felt that safety created an important caveat. For example, if a teen thinks a friend needs help, e.g., because of an eating disorder or serious depression, and the friend is resistant, then she felt a breach of privacy is warranted because she might need assistance or advice from a trusted adult.

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to be the good students and high achievers who are under extra pressure to maintain their grade point average to get into the best colleges. Nationally, 75% of all high school students cheat and 80% of honors and AP students cheat on a regular basis. Copying homework from

another kid is not even considered cheating by students.

Another group of students who cheat is athletes. And varsity athletes are more likely to cheat

with steroids than nonvarsity athletes. Pope cited research that shows there's widespread use of drugs like Ritalin and Adderall among high school and college students. These medications are usually prescribed for Attention Deficit Disorders (ADD), but students use them to cut through their exhaustion and help them focus on tests. Pope says that kids feel forced to cheat because so many of their friends are doing it. Honest students are likelier to get lower scores because they didn't cheat.

• **Health issues:** Students are showing signs of increased headaches, stomach problems, changes in weight, difficulty sleeping, increased sweating and exhaustion.

Stress and lack of sleep are causing kids to suffer from depression, anxiety disorders, and drug and alcohol abuse. Affluent kids are more likely to abuse drugs than inner city kids. "Cutting" to draw blood is a new alarm and is seen in girls more often than boys. Although it

is normal for all teenagers to experience mood swings, parents can watch for signs of distress, like mood changes which last for more than two weeks, changes in appetite patterns, or the wearing of long sleeved clothes to hide cuts. Suicide rates have increased among teens. The

rates for middle school girls went up 75% in the last few years. If kids even joke about suicide, Pope said, take it seriously and seek help.

And after all this pressure, heads of companies who hire these students after college say that they're don't show creativity or think outside the box. They are unable to take risks for fear of failure because they have always been buffered. They don't ask questions for fear of looking stupid, and they are unable to take criticism. These stressed out kids don't function well in the world on their own because they have never had downtime to learn to cook, do the laundry, balance the checkbook. CEOs have even seen mothers accompanying their kids to salary negotiations at work!

The good news is that there are steps to take to reduce high school kids' stress.

Parents can

- convey a definition of success measured by internal values.
- check for over-scheduling.
- honor sleep, social and family activities. Attempt to have dinner together as a family at least a few times a week and ask how kids are doing.

“Attempt to have dinner together as a family at least a few times a week and ask how kids are doing.”

- show that you value academic integrity and engaged learning. Tell your children that it's most important that they studied and didn't cheat and that it's okay that they didn't get an A grade.
- debunk the myth of college admission. Research shows that kids don't have to go to an Ivy League school to succeed in life. 80% of all college applicants get into their 1st choice school, and it turns out to be the right choice for them.
- look for signs of stress and unhealthy behavior.
- strive to be a role model for health and well being.
- allow kids to fail and take responsibility for it.
- teach kids that they can always reinvent themselves if they fail.

Schools can

- examine how students use their time (advisory, assembly, homework) and schedule exams before school breaks.
- focus on project-based learning instead of lecture and note-taking.
- consider alternative assessments besides written tests.
- add new counseling/advisories.

Most students say they learn best when learning is 'hands on', when the teacher cares, and when the information is relevant to their lives. **P**

Tasneem Karimbhai is a Real Estate Agent and parent of a freshman and junior at Drew School. She can be reached at tkarimbhai@gmail.com

Brave New World

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Q: *What's a parent to do when a teen comes home late after curfew?*

A: Parents need to be okay with late night calls, and teens understand that they need to accept consequences if they break an agreement. Teens usually have the best intentions to keep parents informed, but sometimes unexpected things come up. As one panelist put it, 'Cell phones are a beautiful thing [to keep lines of communication open].' Parents are cautioned not to project an angry, upset tone, even if there may be some justification, as this is likely to make teens shut down. Sometimes it's best for everyone to cool off, sleep on it and have a conversation the next day.

Parents, the panelists said, apologize to your teen when you make a mistake. Many parents find this difficult to do, but teens respect parents immensely for such willingness, and this mindset makes teens even more open to consequences when they do mess up.

Q: *If a teen gets drunk and needs to be picked up from a party, what is a parent to do the next weekend?*

A: Positively acknowledge your teen for calling you, admitting a mistake and reaching out to you to stay safe. Confirm your unconditional love. Most teens realize when they've crossed the line and are already upset themselves. Consider a briefer consequence combined with a constructive dialogue about how to go forward. This will have more long-term positive impact than a prolonged grounding without talking. Teens do want the opportunity to mend fences and earn back their parents' trust.

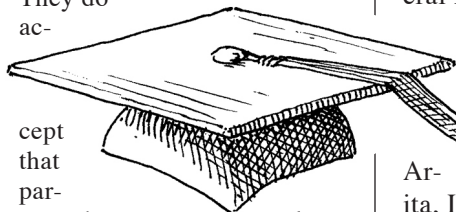
Q: *What about parents as*

Moving On

Compiled by Elizabeth Fishel

Facebook Friends or checking a teen's e-mail?

A: Most teens say an emphatic 'No' to parents as Facebook Friends or looking at their teens' e-mails. Teens consider it a breach of trust for parents to do either without asking. They do ac-



cept that parents have a role to help teens understand the permanence of their postings.

Q: *How can we as parents get our teens to open up and talk to us?*

A: Make it known that you are always available, but don't press. For most teens, their parents' opinions are valued, when asked. It is legit for parents to ask, "Do you want to talk?" but be prepared that sometimes a teen doesn't want to talk. Be a good listener when your teen is ready to talk. Parents also need to be mindful that teens don't always want solutions. Our panelists told us that sometimes they just want to wallow.

Teens urged parents to trust the way they've raised their children. That parents trust their teens demonstrates that parents trust themselves and how they've parented. In the 21st century, technology has radically changed teens' lives, but the basis of healthy relationships between teens and their parents still depends on mutual trust, unconditional love, and respect of privacy built incrementally over years. **P**

Mikiko Huang is a pediatrician who has been active in Bay Area schools for 15 years, and she is also the mom of two sons.

The transition from high school to college and the world beyond is a rite of passage both joyful and jolting. Who better to help navigate this important next step than students who have gone before? Several Head-Royce parents in the Resource Group for Community Well-Being (including Faith

Ar-ita, Liz Block, Amy Chu, and

Elizabeth Stumpf)

polled graduates and created *Moving On*, a collection of thoughtful advice and practical strategies. Here, a sampling from students at colleges around the country talking about the surprises and challenges on campus:

I came into college thinking that it would be like high school-- four years, and then I'd move on. I really didn't expect to love college. It's the most wonderful thing that has happened to me. It was hard to get settled at first but it's really, really good now.

-Freshman girl, UC campus

I was surprised by how quickly I got close to my friends. It took longer in high school.

-Freshman girl, East

Coast college

I hadn't put much thought into what it was going to be like, and it was just sort of surprising how much freedom I had.

Being away from my parents and anyone I

knew, I had a lot more responsibility for everyday things, and making sure I did the stuff I was supposed to—like homework—fell on me.

-Freshman boy, small Midwest college

It's not an easy transition. Independence is great but a bit scary.

-Junior girl, East Coast women's college

Living in the dorms was a challenge for me. I had no problem adjusting to living

in a very small box with a loft bed and all my possession stored underneath. I had no problem living with two other very different roommates in a double room.

I had no problem sharing the bathroom with 65 girls. My problem was living with 90 other people who were constantly distracting me from my work. It was too much fun.

-Junior girl,

UC campus

All of a sudden, there was so much to do and so much free time to do it in. The weekly workload was tremendous right from the outset, so it required a great deal of discipline. Learning to

effectively and efficiently manage my time was a skill that took time to develop.

-Junior boy, Midwest college

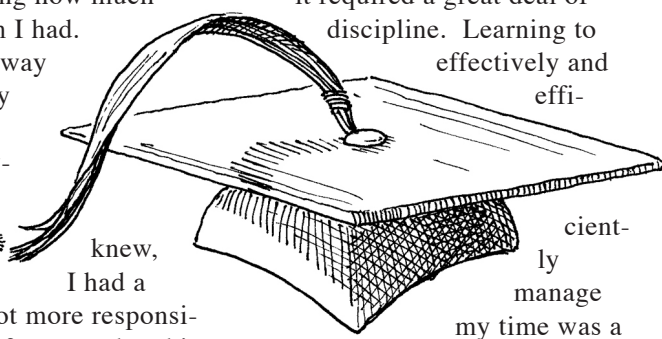
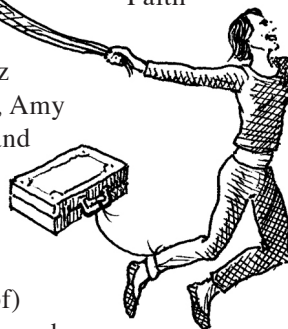
You have so many choices, and there isn't really a clear path that you are supposed to take. It's important to forge your own path, and not rely too much on other people's opinions, because that won't make you happy.

-Freshman girl, East Coast college

Time seems very finite when you're in college, and finding the time to balance all of my activities is something I struggle with. There is no one telling you how you should schedule your activities. I know many people who successfully accomplish many non-academic goals while in school. I think the key is not to pile everything on at once.

-Freshman girl, East Coast women's college **P**

Elizabeth Fishel is the editor of Parenteen, the author of several books including Reunion, and the mother of two sons, Head-Royce graduates, now in their twenties.



Science Briefs: Helpful Findings for Parents of Teens

by Diana Divecha, Ph.D.

Friends and Lovers

Researchers are beginning to study teen romance and are finding some consistent trends. Not surprisingly, over the high school years, teens spend increasingly more time with, and thinking about, the other sex, at least in the mostly white, mostly heterosexual group that was studied. Researcher Wyndol Furman at the University of Denver found that romance in young teens was about companionship, friendship, and exploring early sexual feelings. Older teens and young adults, however, focused more on qualities of intimacy, and were influenced by their own relationship with their parents. If they experienced trust and support from their parents, they looked for, and offered, the same caretaking qualities in their partner.

Risky Behavior – Teens are of Two Minds

Teens are smart – 15-year-olds can reason like adults on logic tests. So why do they make risky choices that lead to car accidents, binge drinking, unsafe sex, or crime? The culprit seems to be in the developing brain, or more specifically in two competing brain systems that come online at different times. Thus a gap of vulnerability is left exactly during the teen years, says Laurence

Steinberg of Temple University who is one of the leading researchers on teen behavior and risk taking.

Hormonal changes during puberty actually remodel an area of the limbic system that makes youth more sensitive to social, emotional, and reward stimuli and therefore especially susceptible to the excitement that can be generated in a peer setting. But the executive network that allows self-regulation, planning, delay of gratification, and overall monitoring, located in the outer regions of the brain and the prefrontal cortex, only matures later in young adulthood. Eventually the two regions become integrated and allow more “cross-talk” in the different brain regions. But in the teen years, from 13 – 17 or so, social excitement can literally overwhelm the ability to control behavior.

What can parents do to help? Psychologists recommend limiting the opportunities for harm where safety is concerned – enforce graduated driving laws, have a “no-questions-asked” bailout agreement for sticky social situations, restrict availability of drugs and alcohol, and allow easy access to mental health services and contraception.

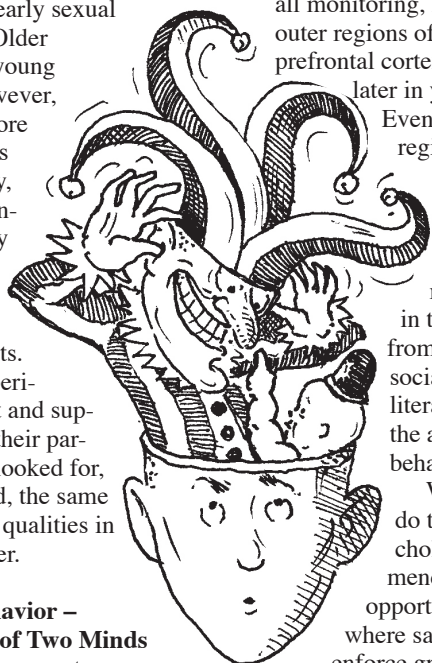
Sexual diversity

More and more young people are proclaiming themselves to be non-heterosexual, and the al-

ternatives are vast, fluid, and becoming more accepted. Earlier generations of youth identified as straight, bisexual, or gay. Today’s youth have more options, and affiliate with more descriptors that reflect non-exclusive attractions and exploration – bi-curious, questioning, pansexual, queer, heterosexual mostly, and polyamorous. One study reported in the journal, *Developmental Psychology*, published by the American Psychological Association, found that one tenth of the 388 young college women surveyed, identified as “mostly straight” meaning that they were “somewhat” attracted to their own sex – not quite straight, but not exactly bisexual. They were right in the middle on measures of attraction, sexual fantasies, and sexual behavior. And they were just as committed to their “mostly straight” identity as the gay, straight and bisexual women were to theirs, even though they struggled with the labels.

One participant said, “I’m still predominantly straight, and I am attracted to men more than I am to women, but clearly I can have feelings for women as well.” Developmental psychologists don’t yet know if such “heteroflexibility” reflects a new temporary exploratory period on the way to an adult sexual identity or if it will remain a lasting identity. But for sure, existing labels don’t always capture young people’s increasingly exploratory behavior. **P**

Diana Divecha is a developmental psychologist in San Francisco and has two teenage daughters, one of whom is a senior at Lick-Wilmerding High School.



Coalition Mission

“To support, educate, and inspire parents of adolescents in order to promote the health and safety of our youth.”

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Readers are encouraged to submit letters to the editor, ideas for articles or articles themselves.

HOT DATES!

For upcoming forums and other resources, please visit www.parentscoalition.net

Upcoming Parents
Coalition Forum:

Monday, April 20, 2009

David Sheff, journalist and New York Times bestselling author of *Beautiful Boy: A Father's Journey Through His Son's Addiction*
The Bay School of San Francisco, 35 Keyes Avenue in the Presidio