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Lamorinda Schools Seek to Reduce Student Stress

By Jean Follmer

The message is clear: our kids are more stressed-out than ever before. The rate of depression amongst our kids continues to increase as they strive to "do more" and to "do more better." Wake up calls like Lafayette film director Vicki Abeles' *Race to Nowhere* have brought the discussion to the forefront for parents, teachers and school administrators across the country.

The Lamorinda school districts recently joined forces to bring renowned pediatrician Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg to Acalanes High School to discuss the need to build resilience in our children - they need to experience failure so they can learn from their mistakes. Ginsburg is on the board of Challenge Success - formerly Stressed-Out Students - a Stanford University Department of Education project. The Lafayette and Orinda school districts have adopted the Challenge Success program, the goal of which is to address the concern that adolescents often compromise their mental and physical health, integrity and engagement in learning as they contend with performance pressure in and out of school.

Are our high performance expectations realistic or desirable?

The effort to provide students with outstanding academic opportunities while minimizing the negative effects of high community expectations begins at the elementary level. Homework is an area in which such balance is sought. "In general, we do have guidelines for the number of anticipated minutes of homework per grade. Our policy has been in place for many years and it becomes a bigger issue at Orinda Intermediate School. We try to stagger project due dates in different classes and the focus is on assigning meaningful homework," says Lisa Bissell, Director of Curriculum and Instruction for the Orinda Union School District.

Rachel Zinn, Lafayette School District's Director of Curriculum and Instruction, echoes those sentiments. "Homework should not be just busy work; the work needs to be purposeful and consistent with class material," she says.

This doesn't mean homework isn't valued. "We believe students and staff should view homework as both expected and appropriate," says Sharon Pincus, the Moraga School District's Director of Pupil Services. "The focus should be a little less on volume and a little more on quality," said Dr. John Nickerson, Assistant Superintendent of Education Services for the Acalanes Union High School District.

As cited in *Race to Nowhere*, cheating incidents are on the rise. Fifty percent of students who enter the University of California, Berkeley, need to take remedial classes to bring them to the level required of an entering freshman. Yet, these students are entering the university with grade point averages well beyond 4.0. How can the average high school student get straight A's in four or five AP courses while participating in extracurricular activities like sports, dance, music and scouting? It used to be that some students in each graduating class took AP courses and some attended an elite college. Where has the bell curve gone?

Children show stress in a number of ways. Headaches and stomachaches that aren't addressed in the younger years may lead to cutting and drug use in later years. A student may sail through elementary and middle school and hit an academic wall in high school.

It's a balancing act, according to Nickerson. "I think we're aware of a lot of the challenges in this hyper-competitive environment yet we're trying to provide opportunities for kids to pursue a wide variety of both academic and extra-curricular activities," he explains.

Nickerson says the high school district hopes kids pursue these opportunities for the right reasons - "We want to see them pursuing these things out of passion and not just as a means of checking the box for college admissions."

When it comes to college, the desire is for students to seek the "right college for them" rather than the "right" college. "What is success, really? I think what we want for our kids is adult happiness and health," concludes Nickerson.

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