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Pressures on high school students

By *Sophia McManus*

Junior year is infamous among students as the hardest year of high school. Juniors are expected to challenge themselves with the most rigorous courses and maintain a schedule of extracurriculars in the hopes of admittance to a good college. There is a mounting pressure to succeed, which stifles the passion for learning.

Many students have grown to believe that a high GPA is the only indicator of success. They are hesitant to challenge themselves, worried that a poor test score will be detrimental to their grades. It takes a large influence to deter students from this level of thinking.

For me, my physics teacher helped me rediscover how to view learning. She opened my eyes to see testing as a learning experience, rather than a way to demonstrate knowledge. She gave tests that forced students to apply material to new situations, favoring the experience over results. Despite the poor scores, she never made the tests easier. Instead, she encouraged test corrections where students had to explain the physical implications of their incorrect answer, and their correct answer. In her class, students were forced to think critically, and embrace their mistakes. My teacher even agreed to add money for an end-of-the-year party if students caught her mistakes. This normalized mistakes, ensuring students would value learning material more than messing up.

Despite the teacher's emphasis on learning rather than testing, she often had to combat the fear of failure instilled by parents. When the first physics test was returned most students immediately asked the teacher, "Can you email my parents and explain that everyone got this score?" The threat of punishments left students terrified of a bad test score. Rather than helping their children succeed, strict parents prevented students from embracing the failure associated with learning.

Even with supportive teachers and parents, the stress of school pervades. Pressure from fellow peers, an often-overlooked factor, is suffocating for many students. Since classmates spend so much time inside classrooms, many students incorporate their academic success with social standing. Students tend to know where they stand compared to others even when there is no ranking system. They know who got the least amount of sleep, who was accepted to prestigious colleges, who aced the final exam.

The problem with this competitive mindset is the desire to be the best. Students find themselves wishing others to fail a test, to have a better comparative grade for colleges. Although thoughts like these are fleeting, there is still a divide in friendships caused by grades. The competitive atmosphere between peers undermines the sense of community and camaraderie that students desperately needed.

Furthermore, the self-awareness of the pressures within school leads students to prove their self worth as the one that "struggles the most." Many view lack of sleep as an indicator of success. The association of poor mental health with success leads students to extenuate their own mental health problems. This inevitably contributes to the perpetuated notion that unhappiness is necessary in high school.

In response to this competitive atmosphere, some students ridicule others that are seen to work too hard in classes, calling them "try hards" as an insult. With the ongoing academic competition, those unwilling to compete for a top spot choose to make fun of those that are.

The academic competition ultimately causes a sense of unhappiness and division between students. To mitigate the sense of competition, students must support each other, and help each other to do their best. It should not be about who got an A, but how many people are able to get an A. The community around the school should take pride in educating everyone, not providing a list of elite students.

Schools alone are not responsible for changing the pressure on students. It is up to the community to change the perspective around grades. The emphasis on grades deters from the importance of education, since it discourages any mistakes. Of course grades matter, it would be ignorant to say otherwise, but receiving worse grades with challenging courses far exceeds the benefits of an "easy A." Motivation and a passion for learning are more important lessons than one bad test score.

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Even with supportive teachers and parents, the stress of school pervades. Pressure from fellow peers, an often-overlooked factor, is suffocating for many students. Since classmates spend so much time inside classrooms, many students incorporate their academic success with social standing. Students tend to know where they stand compared to others even when there is no ranking system. They know who got the least amount of sleep, who was accepted to prestigious colleges, who aced the final exam. The problem with this competitive mindset is the desire to be the best. Students find themselves wishing others to fail a test, to have a better comparative grade for colleges. Although thoughts like these are fleeting, there is still a divide in friendships caused by grades. The competitive atmosphere between peers undermines the sense of community and camaraderie that students desperately needed. Furthermore, the self-awareness of the pressures within school leads students to prove their self worth as the one that "struggles the most." Many view lack of sleep as an indicator of success. The association of poor mental health with success leads students to extenuate their own mental health problems. This inevitably contributes to the perpetuated notion that unhappiness is necessary in high school. In response to this competitive atmosphere, some students ridicule others that are seen to work too hard in classes, calling them "try hards" as an insult. With the ongoing academic competition, those unwilling to compete for a top spot choose to make fun of those that are. The academic competition ultimately causes a sense of unhappiness and division between students. To mitigate the sense of competition, students must support each other, and help each other to do their best. It should not be about who got an A, but how many people are able to get an A. The community around the school should take pride in educating everyone, not providing a list of elite students. Schools alone are not responsible for changing the pressure on students. It is up to the community to change the perspective around grades. The emphasis on grades deters from the importance of education, since it discourages any mistakes. Of course grades matter, it would be ignorant to say otherwise, but receiving worse grades with challenging courses far exceeds the benefits of an "easy A." Motivation and a passion for learning are more important lessons than one bad test score.

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