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Overachieving Students Hear a New Message: Lighten Up Schools, Parents Seek to Dial Back Academic Demands

By Lori Aratani Washington Post Staff Writer Tuesday, February 6, 2007

Eleven students are breathing deeply in the darkened classroom at Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda. They're relaxing their facial muscles, loosening their bellies and trying to focus on the soles of their feet.

It's not the kind of after-school activity one would expect at this Washington area high school known for academic rigor. But these days, some educators and parents are trying to teach students at Whitman and other top schools a new skill: how to dial it down, pull back and relax.

In a region where the high school experience has evolved into an advanced placement-fueled academic arms race, parents and school officials are starting to do the unthinkable: They're saying no to adolescents who want to load up on AP courses, schedule eight-period days and join the school newspaper, track team and high school band at the same time.

Instead, they're encouraging them to take honors instead of AP courses, instituting homework-free weekends and changing class schedules to give students time to breathe and regroup between subjects. And at Whitman, they're teaching them to meditate.

There has always been stress in students' lives, but parents, counselors and experts say there is more today than ever. And teens say most often it is schoolwork and college applications that are putting them on edge.

In a 2005 poll, conducted by The Washington Post, the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University, more than half the D.C. area adolescents surveyed -- 58 percent -- said school was their biggest cause of stress. About 35 percent of local teens said they experienced stress frequently, compared with 27 percent of teens nationwide.

"People make it seem like you can't be competitive if you don't take a thousand AP courses," said Elaine Singerman, a junior at Oakton High School in Vienna. "It's like our educational system is eating us alive."

At Whitman, the effort to calm students has taken the form of weekly meditation sessions.

Every Wednesday, meditation instructor Jonathan Foust leads the group through a series of breathing exercises -- a 60-minute respite from homework, taxing extracurriculars and the daily stress of being a teen.

On a recent day, a mix of boys and girls in hoodies and T-shirts gathered in Room C-124. After they arranged their desks in a circle and the fluorescent lights were dimmed, Foust went around the room and asked them about their stressors. Schoolwork was No. 1 on everyone's list.

Foust then led the students through the exercises: encouraging them to take deep breaths, clear their heads and relax their arms. He had them meditate sitting down and standing up. When a series of announcements over the PA system threatened to break the reverie, Foust gently reminded his pupils that being able to screen out such noise is critical to the art of relaxing.

"It helps you escape for a while," said Sammi Massey, 14.

By the end of the hour-long session, one student was so relaxed -- or, perhaps, so exhausted from a long day at school -- he fell asleep.

"We're trying to change the atmosphere so that people understand it's better to have a well-balanced student going to a 'good fit' college, as opposed to a neurotic going to an Ivy League school," said Fran Landau, director of school counseling at Whitman.

Last fall, Holton Arms, a private girls' school in Bethesda, introduced a schedule designed to give students more time to meet with teachers outside of class as well as more free periods during the week to pursue individual interests. The school also encourages parents to delay the college search until junior year.

"The main message we give them is: 'Don't worry. Your child should be living high school, not worrying about college,'" said Beatrice Fuller, the school's co-director of college counseling.

At Oakton High, counselors have tried to reduce stress by being upfront about homework loads. Too often, counselor Tim Hopkins said, students were enrolling in AP classes without knowing how much work was required. By being told ahead of time, teens can decide whether they can handle the work.

The school, like many others, also publishes a list of where its students enroll after graduation -- a gentle reminder that there are plenty of good schools out there.

Even middle schools are getting into the act. Thomas W. Pyle Middle in Bethesda, which feeds into Whitman, has established homework-free weekends and study skills workshops to help children become more organized and less stressed.

At Whitman, Principal Alan Goodwin also has resisted pressure to start an International Baccalaureate program out of concern that it would intensify an already tense academic environment. Three years ago, parents launched the Stressbusters Committee, which focuses

on finding ways to help students feel less anxious.

But getting high-achieving, type-A students to slow down can be a challenge.

When Marcy Berger's son Andrew, a thoughtful, highly motivated college-bound student at Whitman, told her as a freshman that he wanted to take an eight-period day-- one more period than is typical -- she told him no. He went to his counselor, who agreed with Mom.

Two years later, when Andrew begged her to let him add AP English to his packed schedule, the answer was the same: No.

But that time, she lost -- a defeat she attributes to family dynamics. While she preaches moderation, her easygoing attitude is not necessarily shared by her husband or son. She relented, and Andrew got an A in the course.

Some of today's academic angst is fueled by demographics. Last year, there were more prospective college applicants than ever, according to the National Association for College Admission Counseling. The bulge in the number of college-age students is expected to continue into 2010, but colleges might not be accepting more students. In fact, some are accepting fewer.

The frenzy is also fueled by the high-achieving culture that is a part of the Washington metropolitan life.

Berger said she's no different from other Washington area parents, who push their children to work hard and do their best. But along with that, she said, she wants to make sure her son spends his high school years doing more than just building a résumé.

"As a parent, you begin to wonder, what kind of situation have I put my children into because there's too much stress and too much pressure," Berger said.

Bekki Sims had the same battle with her daughter, Lillie. When Lillie wanted to add AP English to her class schedule at Whitman, Sims argued that honors English had a reading list that might be more appealing. Ultimately, Lillie agreed to take honors rather than AP English.

Students say they hear what their parents and counselors are saying, but they also say they feel like they can't slow down.

So what's a student to do?

"Keep things in perspective," said Maggie Tsang, 17, a senior at Holton Arms. "It's important to realize there are bigger things ahead."

Added Kevin Burke, a junior at Oakton: "Just know you'll be okay. College will be easier."

Staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.