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Tackling the Disturbing Trend of Stressed-Out Students

By Uma Unni



From left: Mary Newman, Allison Gans, Holly Newman and Graham Wiseman Photo provided

average, students were getting barely six hours of sleep.

"I was completely shocked and horrified by that figure," said Mandy Chivers, Acalanes High School Parents Club vice president of communications. "Something has to change. As parents, we can't just sit here with these statistics - we need to make something happen."

In January, the Acalanes Parents Club Wellness Committee organized Green Ribbon Day, an event promoting mental health awareness. Volunteer-run tables in the Acalanes school quads provided information on stress, anxiety, depression and overall mental health.

The same evening, the Wellness Committee held a Parent Education event, "Harmful Stress and its Impact on Teen Health," which addressed the growing problems of anxiety and depression amongst students in the district. Parents and AUHSD leadership, including district Superintendent John Nickerson and Acalanes Principal Alison Silvestri, attended the meeting.

The main event was a four-person panel, featuring a Lamorinda pediatrician, an Acalanes counselor, a Contra Costa crisis manager, and a Miramonte High School graduate. The panelists discussed student stress, and what could be done to help anxious students target the main sources of undue stress.

Panelist Kate Wolffe, currently a freshman at UC Berkeley, spoke about her experience growing up in Orinda. A recent graduate of Miramonte High School, she described growing up in a town filled with "parents, teachers and students of Orinda, California, who are white-knuckled drivers, pencil gnawers, Google Calendar obsessives."

"From kindergarten on, we Orinda elementary kids fall into a spiral of organized recreation: character-building hyperactivity until we get old enough to fill out our own Google Calendars, the momentum of the spiral being all we ever know," she said.

According to the 2013 California Healthy Kids Survey, which was administered to all four of the AUHSD schools that year, more than 900 students from the Acalanes Union High School District (AUHSD) seriously considered suicide. Twenty-four percent of ninth-graders and 26 percent of 11th-graders reported feeling so sad or hopeless that they had stopped doing some usual activities - a classic symptom of depression.

A subsequent survey taken in 2015, the Challenge Success Survey, revealed that little has changed since then.

The Challenge Success Survey was administered by the Challenge Success program, a nonprofit group associated with the Stanford Graduate School of Education. The results showed that large numbers of Acalanes High School students admitted to feeling high levels of stress, to cheating, and, on average, students were getting barely six hours of sleep.

Wolffe explained how her own stress mainly came from her desire to be admitted into a college that her community would "respect her for attending." Wolffe noted that UC Berkeley accepted a mere 16.9 percent of applicants in the year she applied.

Panelist Dr. Daniel Robbins, a pediatrician who has practiced in Lamorinda for 25 years, said that he has observed strikingly high levels of anxiety in his patients over the years. Echoing Wolffe, he blamed the fact that communities like Lamorinda place tremendous emphasis on getting acceptance to prestigious colleges.

On a practical note, he urged families to do their best to make teens' lives a little less stressful through simple practices, like making it a point to eat family dinners together. He also strongly recommended that parents monitor students' cell phone usage during the school week. His concerns about excessive phone usage were not unfounded - the Challenge Success Survey revealed that during homework time, 44 percent of Acalanes students texted their friends, 30 percent watched TV, Netflix and YouTube, and 29 percent went on social media.

Dr. Robbins also had suggestions for the school administration. These included delaying the start of classes by a half hour, and adjusting the academic calendar so that final exams fell before winter break. Silvestri said the school leadership is exploring many possible changes, including block scheduling, a homeroom system, and alternative homework schedules.

Green Ribbon Day was the Wellness Committee's first attempt to raise awareness of mental health. The committee is also in the process of working with Acalanes to implement policy changes to reduce the burden on students.

As Chivers put it: "We just want to bring happiness back to our schools."

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