

The Stress of High School Students By Lea Bond

The stress endured by high school students due to workload has been steadily increasing over the years. More pressure is being placed on high school students to succeed academically. Many of these students suffer from chronic stress which leads them to “burn out”, often before attending college. Gwadz, an author of a recent study at New York University, says that more and more colleges are complaining about students being disengaged, dropping out, and taking extended amounts of time to graduate. A reasonable amount of academic, social, athletic, and personal challenges have long been referred to as “good stress”, as these factors can push and motivate students. However, if these challenges cause a high amount of “unnecessary” stress, they can impede student ability to succeed leading to academic disengagement and mental health issues extending into adult life. Elevated levels of stress can degrade the immune system, elevate the risk of heart problems, aggravate respiratory and gastrointestinal issues, and cause severe anxiety and depression. This chronic stress also leads to higher substance use as a coping method. In the study of students at elite high schools, 38% of students surveyed claimed that they had been drunk in the past month. Early substance abuse is extremely damaging to the teenage brain and can lead to long-term addiction.

High levels of stress are seen in both public and private school students, but the stress of students in public schools is more commonly studied and the stress of students in private schools is understudied. Families pay considerable tuition for private education, which puts higher pressure on these students to succeed. Private schools offer a high-quality education often characterized by high standards, academic rigor, advanced courses, and a high extent of extracurriculars. About half of all private school students suffer from chronic stress. The issue is that this stress has become normalized. It is more competitive than ever before to get into college, which leads teachers and parents to intensively push students to succeed. The question is, how can teachers and parents create the right school environment that challenges and pushes students, without causing unhealthy amounts of stress?

Parents are often blamed for the stress of their kids since they often take their kids’ success as their own, or push their children hoping that a successful college and high school experience will give them more opportunities and lead them to a happier life. Parents face the challenge of figuring out just how hard to push. The issue, however, traces back further than the parental involvement. Both teachers and schools need to teach students how to healthily cope with their stress. Students need to find a balance between relaxation and their work, but in order for students to find this balance, the culture at schools needs to change. A decent amount of work and homework is healthy and keeps student’s brains active and practicing what they learned in school in order to keep it fresh, but in many schools, homework has reached an extent that is harming the students rather than benefiting them. The National Education Association and the National PTA have found that no more than 10 minutes of homework per grade number gives the most beneficial results for students academically. This means that third graders should be receiving about 30 minutes of homework per night while seniors could receive about two hours of homework per night. Research conducted by Stanford University in 2013 found that more than 2 hours of homework is counterproductive. The research also found that spending too much

time on homework meant that the students weren't meeting their developmental needs or developing other critical life skills. Many students prioritize school over their passions and hobbies outside of school, which keeps them from mentally developing other, more significant skills.

The only way for students' stress levels to decrease to a healthy amount is if parents and administrators/teachers change the pressure they put on kids. Schools need to consider the consequences of putting so much stress on high school students and need to reduce homework load, and parents need to let their kids pursue their own ambitions. This is a cultural shift that needs to happen within the community. High school stress levels are higher than ever before due to the extreme amounts of work they receive. The long-term effects of this are unknown, but they are assumed to be harsh and unhealthy since the short-term effects are already unhealthy.

Until school culture changes, one solution is to train kids to manage their stress levels. Research in recent year has been focused on preventing stress rather than managing it. This can be problematic because with many people preventing stress means avoiding certain situations and stress triggers, many of which might be unavoidable, such as work and family stress. Some techniques to reduce stress include meditation, exercise, prayer, deep breathing, and many other reducers. The problem, however, is that very little research has been done on monitoring stress and managing it. The most effective stress reducer is different depending on the person since everyone experiences a different kind of stress. In the Brainwaves Lab, we are currently working on exactly that. We want to monitor the stress of a high school student at Wildwood School throughout the day, and have them try different stress reducers. First, their stress throughout an average day will be recorded using an Emotiv headset. Then we will rerun the lab but using some different stress reducers throughout the day. This lab will be repeated on several different students. Running this lab would give information on what makes a Wildwood student's stress peak, and the most effective reducer. Very minimal research has been done regarding stress triggers and reducers for high school students, so our research will be highly beneficial.

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