



EDUCATION

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Students feel the pressure of more work, expectations — and so do their teachers

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For high-achieving high school students, academic stress has its own hashtag.

It's #IBProbs. IB is short for international baccalaureate, a rigorous course of study offered in some high schools that is recognized world-wide. Probs is short for, you guessed it, problems.

Search for the saying on social media, and you'll find posts by frantic students:

ADVERTISING



"I don't even feel tired anymore, I just am tired. Like it's a part of me."

"Laminate your index cards while studying. Not only does it prevent smearing but the teardrops actually roll right off."

"These next three days will be the death of me."

Adults: If you think you're overwhelmed by all that work and life throw at you, try being a school kid. Or a teacher, for that matter.

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During the school year, teenagers report higher levels of stress than grownups, according to the American Psychological Association. Younger students don't have it much better, either. In fact, they may be just as anxious as the typical psychiatric patient of the 1950s, according to a study from 2000. And, if anything, the pressure has only gone up since.

It's not difficult to imagine why. It has never been harder to get into college — or pay for it. For elementary school students, time for recess and free play has steadily given way to high-stakes testing and increasing academic demands.

"Are we asking 4-, 5- and 6-year-olds to do something that's unnatural for them? For a large portion of children in that age group, sitting still and asking them to pay attention to boring stuff is asking them to do more than they can do," said Dr. Jeffrey Brosco, a professor of clinical pediatrics at the University of Miami.

And teachers? The measly paychecks, political meddling and dwindling public respect mean fewer and fewer are up for the challenge. In a 2015 survey by the American Federation of Teachers, 73 percent of respondents said they often feel stressed at work. Only about half said they were enthusiastic about their job.

The college push

Olivia Field had a decision to make. As she entered her senior year at Coral Gables High, should she take yet another advanced calculus class?

Interested in writing and politics, the 17-year-old doesn't expect to pursue a job that will require her to figure out the slope of a curve. But all around her, an unavoidable, unexplainable pressure made her second-guess her decision to go for a less-rigorous class.

It's the same kind of pressure that has led her to expect, along with prom and yearbook signing, to suffer a "breakdown moment" at some point in the school year. As a student in the International Baccalaureate program, she's watched plenty of other students go through it.

"It's normal," she said. "There's just this stress surrounding the program that you cannot escape, and this intensity about it that follows you until you get into a good school."

Getting into a good school often means loading up on extracurriculars. Field is editor-in-chief of her high school news magazine, president of the English Honors Society, and vice president of the National Honors Society. She's on the school badminton team, a participant in model United Nations and model Congress, and she's taking college-level courses.

"It's funny. It's like, I list all of that and say, 'Wow I sound like an overachiever,' " she said. "But then I'll sit with my college adviser and she'll list all of the things that are expected and I'll think, 'Am I doing enough?'"

It's a fair question. Acceptance rates at elite colleges have plummeted to record lows in recent years, edging out even the most-impressive students. Less than five percent of applicants were accepted at Stanford University this year, and the rate at Harvard wasn't much higher.

The quest to get into top schools drives some students to load up on online courses outside of the regular school day to boost their grade point average, said Donna Bray, who leads guidance counseling for Miami-Dade School for Advanced Studies.

"They're carrying loads and schedules that many of us definitely wouldn't be able to carry as a teenager, and maybe couldn't manage now," she said.

Shari Gayton, who leads guidance counseling at Coral Reef High, has had to talk-down students who obsessively check online gradebooks and pressure teachers into allowing them to redo a low-scoring assignment.

"They really are under a great deal of pressure to perform these days and it's unfortunately become a normal part of being a teenager," Gayton said.

All work, not play

It starts in elementary school. Across the country, school systems have shifted to new, tougher learning standards that call for kindergartners to learn how to read and for third graders to map out fractions on a number line.

A battery of tests have come along with the higher academic expectations. They're used to measure everything from whether students should graduate high school, to whether teachers can keep their jobs or if schools can keep their doors open.

"You have third-graders tell you, 'I'm so scared. I have to do well.' Which is unfortunate," said Isabel Rodriguez-Duncan, a licensed clinical social worker and clinician at Florida International University's Center for Children and Families. "Little ones are saying that, when we used to only think about that dynamic occurring with sophomores and juniors in high school."

In the dash to keep up, the percentage of 9-year-olds reporting they are assigned homework is up since 1984, according to federal data. Time for recess, meanwhile, has been cut at 20 percent of schools since 2002, according to report from 2008.

In Miami-Dade, a group of moms have launched an online petition to require more recess in school, and they've joined a state-wide movement to make play time a matter of law.

"Frankly our kids are being subjected to more and more academic demands and pressure. These kids walk into school and the first week of school they're tested," said Kate Asturias, one of the local moms lobbying for more play time. "It's very stressful for these kids."

Teachers under pressure

Teachers also feel squeezed for time. Often times, every minute of the school day is accounted for in schedules that get handed down from higher-ups. In the American Federation of Teachers survey, almost half said the leading cause of stress in the classroom was time pressure.

"We just don't have enough instructional hours in a day," Karla Hernandez-Mats, president of United Teachers of Dade, told the Miami Herald in March.

At the same time, Florida lawmakers have chipped away at teacher tenure while implementing evaluation systems based on student test scores. All for a median pay of less than \$52,000 in Miami-Dade County, according to state figures.

Whenever it gets to be too much, Regina King, a fourth-grade teacher at Sunset Elementary, just remembers to take a deep breath.

King has been trained in mindfulness techniques thanks to Mindful Kids Miami, a nonprofit that works in local schools to help relieve stress on teachers and students alike.

"I think this helps the whole child become a better citizen and become a better person," King said. "We teach them reading and math and science, but do we teach them, really well, how to deal with stress?"

Mindfulness is often described as being present and aware in the moment. Dorlisa Banbanaste, program coordinator for Mindful Kids Miami, tries to avoid describing it as meditation, but some of the same techniques apply: measured breathing, a non-judgmental attitude and stillness.

Decades of research have shown mindfulness to impact the parts of the brain that deal with memory, executive function, and the regulation of behavior and emotions.

"Mindfulness really increases the resilience of teachers and students, which is really important to have in a life that is stressful," Banbanaste said.

It's important to note a certain amount of stress is normal, said Jeremy Pettit, Director of the Child Anxiety and Phobia Program in FIU's Center for Children and Families. The important thing is learning healthy ways — like mindfulness — to cope. Simply avoiding stressful situations won't do a child any good, he said.

"Sometimes we need to get out of our comfort zone," he said. "That's not necessarily a bad thing. But we want to make sure that as we're pushing, that kids have the appropriate skills to cope with what we're asking them to do."

