**Crisis in stress: Schools struggle to keep kids safe**

*By Sharon Noguchi,* [*snoguchi@mercurynews.com*](mailto:snoguchi@mercurynews.com)*,* POSTED:   04/09/2016 02:00:28 PM PDT | UPDATED:

Alarmed at escalating levels of student stress and fearful of its potential deadly impact, educators at the Bay Area's top-performing high schools are desperately trying to ease up on pressure. They're pushing back school start times, re-examining homework loads, coordinating tests and warning parents about buying into college myths. Lurking at the back of their minds is an unspoken fear -- of becoming another Palo Alto. No one wants to be the next community to attract a national spotlight on children taking their own lives.

"What's on the shoulders of these kids is so intense, much more than even five years ago," said Michael Boitz, music teacher at Saratoga High, who noted schools are highly concerned but limited in what they can do. "You can't control the wind, but you can adjust the sails." These are not idle worries. Schools around the Bay Area are grappling with students who are seized with panic attacks and eating disorders, cutting themselves and attempting suicide. Mental health crises are significantly higher than five years ago, many educators say.

In a recent two-week period at Irvington High in Fremont, mental health authorities or parents were summoned because nine students were suffering so much distress they needed to be involuntarily confined for protection, assistant principal Jay Jackson said. ***A survey last spring found 54 percent of Irvington students suffering from depression*** and 80 percent showing moderate to severe anxiety levels. The findings were so astonishing that the surveyor, Saint Louis University professor Stuart Slavin, and his analyst ran the results three times.

"It was appalling," said Slavin, a pediatrician and associate dean of the university's school of medicine. ***"I don't know a population that's ever been studied that had a worse mental health profile."*** The 1,400 students -- two-thirds of Irvington's student body -- who responded (many others were taking AP tests that day) ***scored significantly worse than Saint Louis medical school students in an earlier study by Slavin.***

Irvington students said the ***pressure to get into a "good" college and heavy workloads were the chief causes of their stress.*** But they also cited the pressure they feel from both themselves and their parents. Competitive high schools such as Irvington have become pressure cookers, with students taking on heavier academic and extracurricular loads. But efforts to decompress run up against parents who may be indifferent to stress and expect an A -- if not an A-plus -- in every class, and students who set especially high goals for themselves. Until an uptick for 2016, University of California admission rates of in-state students fell steadily to an all-time low last year, as worried students apply to more and more colleges.

"I stress about how many things I need to do," said Ella Milliken, a sophomore at Los Altos High. ***"The better you are, the better the college you get into, and the better your life will be."*** "We try to counsel kids that ***you're not a product of your GPA,"*** said Ruth Steele, principal of San Ramon Valley High. But often they're receiving a contrary message at home. Parents lean on their kids hard to ensure their success, said sophomore Rijul Agarwal of Los Altos High, "but they don't exactly consider how their kids feel about their parents pushing them to that length." His own parents aren't as forceful as others, he said.

Highly successful parents, plant in their kids the ethos of high expectations. "Part of being American is to get to a place better than where you came from," said Emma Seevak, 17, a senior at Piedmont High in the hills above Oakland. "If you're growing up in Piedmont, there's this feeling of where else is there to go?" But some parents, on the other hand, blame schools -- teachers who don't teach, unproductive homework and classes that aren't stimulating. They say they have to hire tutors and seek out enrichment classes, further burdening their children.

Alarmed at students harming themselves, she's been campaigning persistently for later school-start times and reducing stress. "We're not going to bury our heads in the sand and pretend this isn't going to happen to us."

The need for vigilance has even led to a state bill, sponsored by Assemblyman Patrick O'Donnell, D-Long Beach, to require schools to have a suicide-prevention policy. It passed an Assembly committee last week.

Palo Alto has responded to its crisis -- four students took their lives in the 2014-15 school year, after a previous cluster beginning in 2008 -- with a host of measures, including added counselors and trained staff to spot troubled students. At Gunn High, students themselves run several efforts to reach out to each other, build camaraderie and reduce the stigma of mental health care.

San Ramon Valley High recently staged a low-stress week. Parent volunteers brought in hot breakfasts. Therapy dogs nuzzled students at lunchtime. Relaxing music wafted over the quad, where students did yoga. Email was banned for a day. The district has limited high school homework to 30 minutes per night per course. Monta Vista High in Cupertino eliminated homework over the summer, limits final exams to two per day and requires students to map out time-management strategies.

"No reasonable person should be taking five college-level classes as a 17-year-old," said Kirk Davis, a physics teacher at Saratoga High, which considered capping advanced-placement classes but dropped the idea because parents and students likely wouldn't have bought into it. As Irvington's Jackson put it, ***"If the administration decided to reduce the number of AP classes," he said, "we would get lynched in the courtyard."*** So the schools brainstorm and borrow ideas, adopting what works and rejecting what bombs -- like Irvington's experiment with lunchtime power naps in the gym.

But whatever schools do, they acknowledge that universities and the powerful College Board, which runs college-entrance and AP exams, weigh heavily in the student-stress equation. "The colleges themselves are creating this entrance requirement," said San Ramon Valley High's Steele. Students load up on AP classes, whose weighted grades can bump up GPAs, after they scan the competitive field. At UC Davis, for example, the average student accepted last year had a weighted GPA of 4.07 -- an A-plus. The UC Berkeley admission rate was 16.9 percent -- its lowest ever.

And for students with the Harvard-or-bust mindset, the challenge is exponentially higher. "Breaking students and families away from brand names is really tough," said Daniel Hillman, principal of Dougherty Valley High in San Ramon. What's also tough is that every year, a new crop of students and parents walks onto campus, turning back the clock. ***"You feel like Sisyphus, pushing a boulder up a hill, and it comes crashing down,"*** said Jackson. ***"You're fighting this paradigm that they need to go to this 'great' college and if not, their life is over."***

Led by the Harvard School of Education, ***some academics have launched an initiative to reform college admissions, to favor sustained community service and downplay multiple extracurricular activities, AP courses and tests.*** It also seeks to challenge "the misconception that there are only a handful of excellent colleges."

In the meantime, teachers and administrators keep a close eye on students for signs of vulnerability. They know it's critical to identify and intervene early. At Saint Louis University, the medical school instituted a slew of changes to reduce stress, including making some classes pass-fail, reducing class time and teaching stress-management skills. The anxiety and depression rates dropped dramatically, Slavin said, and national board exam scores actually rose. Experts agree on another thing teens need in order to cope: Getting at least nine hours of sleep a night can help in regulating emotions and reducing anxiety, depression and bipolar disorder. ***Still, the reality is that many busy students tout their sleep deficits like a badge of honor***. At Dublin High, freshman Kayin Estocapio gets about six hours of sleep a night and takes an afternoon nap. "A lot of upperclassmen get less sleep than I do," he said. "I'm just getting myself ready for when that comes around."

Contact Sharon Noguchi at 408-271-3775. Follow her at [Twitter.com/noguchionk12](http://twitter.com/noguchionk12).