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# BEYOND 'DOING SCHOOL': FROM 'STRESSED-OUT' TO 'ENGAGED IN LEARNING'



**EN BREF** Une étude portant sur plus de 5 000 élèves fréquentant treize écoles secondaires publiques et privées américaines avec des taux élevés de réussite constate que de nombreux élèves sont anxieux et épuisés. Certains font face à la pression de l'école secondaire en abdiquant – en choisissant de ne pas faire leurs travaux ou de faire le strict minimum. D'autres deviennent des « zombies », mémorisant et recrachant des masses d'information sans prendre le temps d'y réfléchir ou de penser de façon critique au contenu. L'initiative Challenge Success travaille avec les écoles pour élaborer et instaurer des politiques et des pratiques atténuant le stress et favorisant l'engagement des élèves, l'intégrité scolaire et la santé physique et mentale. Les changements de politiques engendrant les meilleurs résultats comprennent de modifier l'horaire et le calendrier scolaires pour établir des attentes réalistes quant aux engagements scolaires et sociaux des élèves; promouvoir une « ambiance d'attention » où tous les élèves ont un lien significatif avec au moins un enseignant; accentuer l'apprentissage et la compréhension plutôt que sur les notes.

*“The effect of society's high expectations and pressures on my generation is scary. Kids are depressed, anxious, sleep deprived, and in some cases suicidal. They respond to stress by drinking to excess, using drugs, cutting themselves, and throwing up their food. Even the kids with the best grades engage in this kind of unhealthy behavior. They cheat and copy homework because thinking for oneself requires too much time and effort. Character, passion, integrity, creativity, and genuineness have slipped right through my generation's fingers.”*

THESE SOBERING WORDS COME FROM A RECENT GRADUATE from a high-achieving public high school in Miami, Florida. She and her peers felt enormous pressure from teachers, parents, other students, and college admissions counselors who expected good grades, high test scores, and acceptance into top universities. She was frustrated that her classmates were disengaged from learning and were compromising their personal values, along with their health and well-being, in response to these expectations. Many of these students were 'doing school'<sup>1</sup> – going through the motions, slogging through the school day, turning in the work, often getting good grades, but with very little attempt to learn the material in depth or master the skills and knowledge of the subject areas. For these students, school was not about 'learning'. It was about making the grades and getting the scores, using all necessary means to achieve, despite the tolls.

In our study of over 5000 students in thirteen high-achieving public and private middle and high schools in the United States, we found similar evidence of disengagement and poor physical and mental health. The students in our study were exhausted, many getting significantly less than the recommended nine hours of sleep each night. Some were sleeping as little as six hours each evening and were experiencing high rates of migraines and stomach problems. Here's a typical school schedule from a high school junior:

- 5:45 a.m.: Wake up and head to the pool for swim team practice
- 7:30 a.m.: Out of the pool, take quick shower, and get to school in time for early bell
- 7:50 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.: School day that includes AP Calculus<sup>2</sup>, AP U.S. History, AP English, Honours Spanish, Biology, Art History, and Physical Education
- Prom planning meeting during lunch
- 3:00 p.m. to 3:45 p.m.: Service club meeting after school
- 4:00 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.: Back to the pool for more swim practice
- 7:00 p.m.: Quick dinner, and then three-four hours of homework
- 11:00 p.m. – midnight: Bedtime, depending on homework load

And the entire routine starts all over again at 5:45 a.m. the next day.

This schedule is fairly typical for the high school students in our study. Most students took advanced classes and participated in extracurricular activities such as sports teams or music ensembles, theatre groups, or other clubs. On average, students reported participating between two and three hours of extracurricular activities each weekday, not counting travel time to and from the activity, but we also had many students who reported between four and six hours of extracurricular activities daily, on top of seven classes and several hours of homework each night. Is it any wonder, then, that these students were exhausted?

More than 70 percent of the high school students reported that they felt often or always stressed by their schoolwork, and many admitted to taking illegal stimulants to stay awake to study and complete the lengthy homework assignments each night. Very few found the homework to be useful or meaningful – which only added to their frustration with the heavy workload. As one student explained, “I'm stressed because I have so many pointless, mundane assignments that take up large amounts of time, without actually [resulting in] learning anything in class.” We often witnessed ‘the morning scramble’ – students at the beginning of each school day, scrambling to copy homework assignments from each other just before the start of classes. This temptation to cheat, to copy homework from a friend or download part of an essay from the Internet, can be fairly intense when you are absolutely exhausted and when several hours' worth of assignments seems to be meaningless busywork.

Students told us over and over again that they wished their school experiences could be different, but they felt powerless. Some students dealt with this pressure by 'opting out' – choosing not to do the work or only doing the absolute minimum necessary. Others became, in their words, 'zombies' – memorizing and then 'spitting back' large chunks of information without taking time to reflect or think critically about the content. As one student lamented, “We have too much work and too little time to do it... We are walking zombies...with no time to be creative or really think.” At a time when the business community is espousing the need for innovative leaders, strong collaborators, and higher standards for ethics in the workplace, these unhealthy student practices seem to leave young people lacking the skills most needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

What to do? In 2004, responding to high levels of adolescent anxiety disorders, depression, substance abuse, and disengagement, educators and health specialists created a research-based intervention at the Stanford University School of Education. The initiative, named Challenge Success, works with schools to design and implement site-based policies and practices that reduce student stress and promote greater student engagement, academic integrity, and physical and mental health. Schools send multi-stakeholder teams of principals, counselors, teachers, students, and parents to bi-annual conferences, and they work throughout the year with Stanford coaches to plan and implement school reform efforts. Most of the schools administer a baseline survey to diagnose specific problem areas on their campuses, and also to generate community-wide understanding of these problems and support for the change process. Schools share data with all stakeholders to create vision and mission statements that guide the reform work.

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Over the past six years of the initiative, we have seen schools make many positive changes to reduce student stress and increase engagement. We encourage each school to examine unique needs and circumstances, and we foster dialogue around the main question: "How do you define success at your school?" Most of our schools examine this question in depth and focus change efforts around students' use of time, school climate, counseling, school curriculum, and pedagogy. If success means healthy, engaged, thriving students who can think critically, creatively, and collaboratively, then schools turn their attention to the components described below in order to help yield these results.

### **A HEALTHIER SCHEDULE**

Try shadowing a student from the start of first period, through seven or eight different classes, with five minutes in between to run to her locker, go to the bathroom, grab something to eat, finish up homework, and deal with the myriad social events that occur in school hallways. The short class periods don't allow much time for teacher-student interaction, group work, or deep reflection. The many transitions during the day interrupt the cognitive processes of thinking about particular subject areas and leave both students and teachers completely exhausted. Students, for instance, have to stop thinking about the teacher's lecture on Hamlet and his existential problems and immediately switch gears to concentrate on cell biology; then, fifty minutes later, they are off to U.S. History to concentrate on the Civil War, and so on throughout the day, often having to sit quietly and take notes on each subject without much time or expectation for active participation. This isn't how deep thinking occurs in the real world, and yet we ask our students to make these transitions seven or eight times a day with different subject areas, different teachers, and different sets of classroom rules, as if that were the best way to learn.

When we asked Challenge Success schools to list the reform practices that had the greatest effect on increasing student engagement and well-being, many agreed that changing the school daily schedule and calendar offered the most bang for the change. No one kind of schedule works best for each different school, but many of our schools moved from the traditional seven- or eight-period day to a rotating block or modified block schedule that offers fewer courses each day for longer periods of time. Schools also added tutorials, late starts, and more free periods for students to slow the pace of the day and promote more time for student-teacher interaction and a chance to get a jumpstart on homework. Many also changed their calendars to hold final exams before vacations, eliminate mid-semester exams, and eliminate summer assignments in order to allow students some real time off. And almost all use test and project calendars to prevent students from having to take several exams and quizzes on the same day or from having too many major projects due at once.

Finally, a few of our schools experimented with new course scheduling guides that have, in the words of one administrator, "significantly changed the workload for many of our students." The course guide lists every course at the school, including all honours and advanced placement courses, and offers an approximation of how much

homework to expect each night in each class. When the students sign up for their courses for the year, they need to add up the total hours of nightly homework, include nine hours for sleep, and then include all of the hours for extracurricular activities such as sports or music lessons. Student, parents, and counselors must sign approval for each schedule. As one counselor admitted, “When the students and parents see it all written down in black and white, they are shocked. They want to sign up for a daily schedule that is clearly over 24 hours! This tool has helped us to have conversations with families about real priorities. What matters most to the students and what constitutes a healthy schedule?”

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## A CLIMATE OF CARE

Another key question for schools to consider is “What constitutes a caring environment?” Our survey asks students to rate how many of their teachers care about them, how many value and listen to the students’ ideas, are willing to help with homework, and get to know the students personally. The students who believe more of their teachers support them in this way are often more engaged with learning, less likely to cheat, and show fewer signs of stress and physical health problems. We ask: “Is there at least one adult at this school you could go to if you had a personal problem?” Surprisingly (at least to us), we have some schools where only 50 percent of the students answered this question affirmatively. When we reported our findings to the schools, the teachers admitted to being surprised as well. They asked, “Don’t students realize that all teachers care about their students? After all, why else would we choose this profession?” But the key here is that the students need to *perceive* this climate of care. It is one thing for a teacher to say she cares about her students, but it is often quite another thing to show this care in multiple ways each day.

Only when students feel known and respected by their teachers will they feel comfortable seeking adult help when needed. When Challenge Success schools focus deliberately on creating a caring climate, the teachers discuss this openly with their students. They make time to connect, learn each student’s name, wave to them in the hallways, learn about their individual interests, and treat them with respect. This is not an easy task when a teacher might have over 170 students to care for each day, especially when she only sees these students for 40 minutes at a time during a jam-packed lesson.

One school responded to this seemingly impossible task by creating the ‘Jared Project’, named after a student who committed suicide at the school the year before. Worried that Jared had felt completely alone at the school and that none of his teachers saw signs that the student was suffering from depression, the principal decided to take proactive measures to prevent this kind of student isolation from happening again. He posted student rosters on the walls of the teacher workroom and instructed each teacher to put a dot next to a student’s name when he or she made a connection with the student. At the end of the first few months of school, every student without a dot was assigned a teacher ‘buddy’ who would deliberately work on fostering a bond with the student. This way, the principal hoped, no student would slip through the cracks unnoticed, and each student would feel that at least one adult at the school could serve as an important advocate.

Several schools have implemented the Jared Project at their sites with positive results. Other schools promote more effective interaction between students and teachers by adding ‘advisory periods’ in their schedules multiple times per week, during which teachers and students meet to discuss personal issues, work on organizational and study skills, and participate in small group activities that promote leadership and social and emotional skills. Often advisors are assigned groups of students that stay with them for several years, increasing the chances that the student will establish a bond with a caring adult.

## A FOCUS ON MASTERY AND THE ‘BIG PICTURE’

With a push across North America for teaching content standards and reliance on high-stakes testing, we have seen more schools resort to teacher-centered, lecture-based lessons and more students resort to a ‘performance-based’ goal orientation, where the focus is on getting the grades and not necessarily learning the material. Students are often afraid to ask questions in class because they don’t want to look dumb or slow down the lesson. They are afraid to take risks on assignments or show creativity for fear that the teacher won’t respond well and will lower their grade. They often don’t retain information, sometimes forgetting key concepts only a few days after cramming for an exam. Challenge Success schools aim to reduce this preoccupation with ‘grades for the sake of grades’ and shift the focus to learning and understanding.

Individual teachers strive to engage students in the lessons and reduce busywork and memorization. As one AP Calculus teacher explains:

*I absolutely minimize memorization. My classroom walls are filled with posters that give key relationships and formulas. Why memorize material that is literally at their fingertips with their smart phones, textbooks, and computers? ... The more I teach, the more I find myself quietly facing my students and asking questions like: “What actually is the meaning of the concept of limit in calculus? ... I know you can now do problems involving limits, but what does it all mean?”*

This teacher also allows extra time on homework and tests, asks for test corrections, and regularly allows students to drop their lowest test grade each semester. His students do far less homework than students in other high-level math classes, but they score as well on the AP exams.

We ask schools to help students look at the ‘big picture’ surrounding grades and rankings, encouraging active and engaged participation in classes and multiple and alternative assessments for learning. In the real world it is extremely rare to have one’s performance evaluated via tests and quizzes. Professionals are usually encouraged to consult with peers, rely on numerous resources, and revise and edit reports and projects until they reach desired results. So too, do we hope to allow students multiple opportunities for revision and redemption. Challenge Success schools often re-examine grading policies to allow second and third chances for kids to succeed. Some schools offer written narratives instead of – or in addition to – student grades.

And many eliminate class rankings, valedictorian status, and perfect GPA awards in order to reduce the focus on numerical scores and shift attention to deeper understanding.

The 'big picture' view applies to post-secondary education as well. Counselors emphasize multiple paths to success and the fact that students can reinvent themselves at any time. The following story exemplifies this point:

I met a student who failed out of his Catholic high school in California. He later took the high school equivalency exam and received his diploma while working in the construction industry with his father. He hated working construction, and his father wasn't thrilled with his performance either. He tried some community college courses, but he failed those as well. Dejected, he went back to construction, convinced he was doomed for life. A year later he tried a different community college and found a particularly caring and engaging Chemistry professor who turned him on to the subject. He ended up transferring to a University of California campus and graduated with honors. He is now pursuing a Ph.D. in Chemistry at Stanford. Without the series of failures in his life, this student likely would not have discovered his talent and passion for the field.

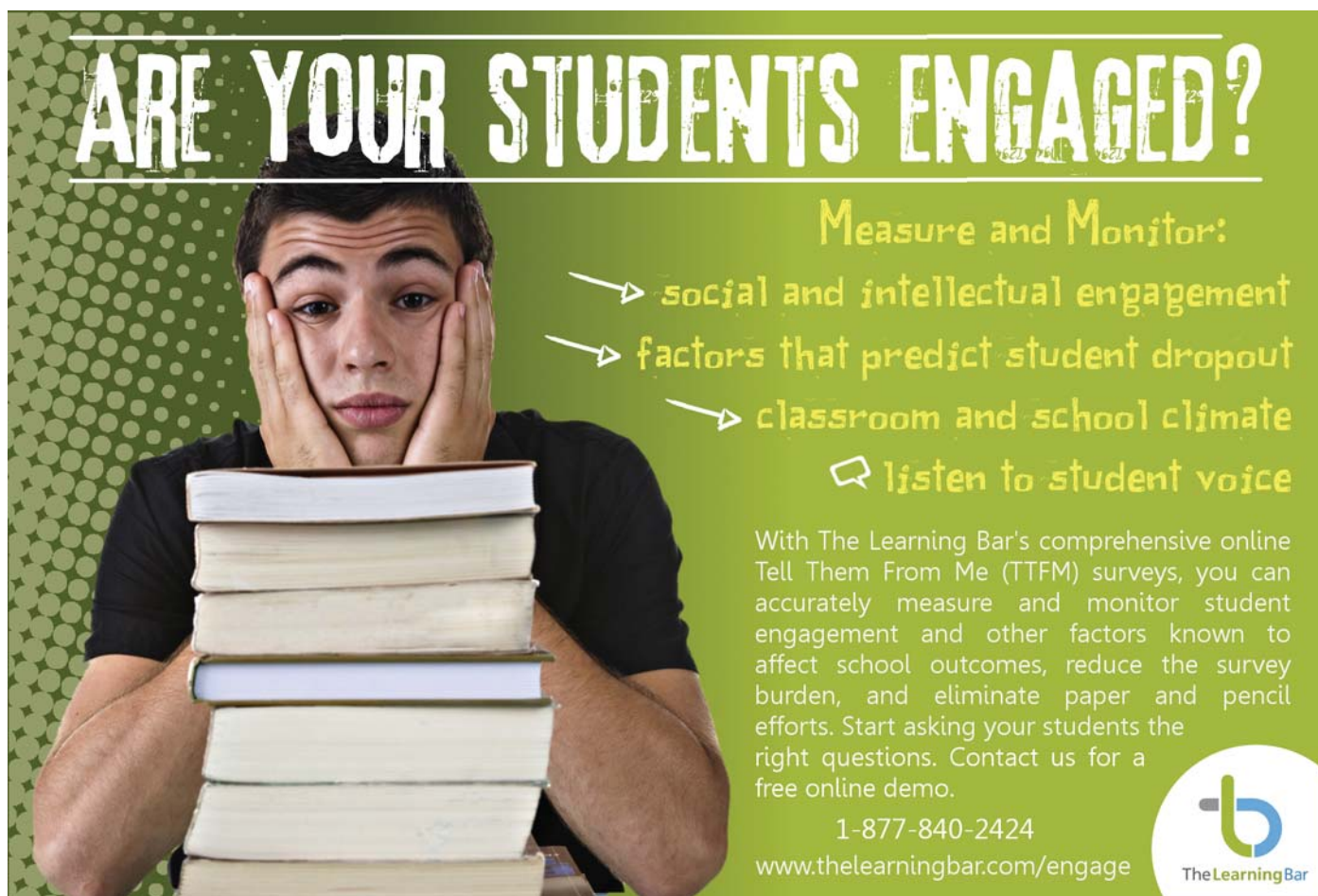
I tell this story to students, parents, and teachers to remind them that there is not one straight and narrow path to success; that grades really don't mean everything; and that life does indeed go on after failure. When we focus on student mastery, physical and mental health, and caring relationships in school, we can help more students see the 'big picture' and prepare for the real demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce.

The Florida student cited at the beginning of this article was frustrated with her peers and with her school and larger community. She sought a solution that would help to foster in students "character, passion, integrity, and creativity." She worked with her administration to raise the necessary funds to send a multi-stakeholder team to the Challenge Success conference last year. Together they are working on a plan to change the unhealthy culture of pressure and stress on their campus. Such a change is not easy, nor does it happen smoothly or quickly, but the schools have a much greater chance of reaching this goal if they focus on a broader definition of school success – one that encompasses more than grades and test scores, and one that recognizes the importance of student health, well-being, and deep engagement with learning. |

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#### Notes

- 1 Denise Pope, *"Doing School": How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed-out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).
- 2 AP: Advanced Placement. These are university-level courses taught in U.S. high schools. Depending on students' performance on subject-specific standardized tests, they use these courses to help gain admission to U.S. colleges and to earn university credits in advance of their first year.



# ARE YOUR STUDENTS ENGAGED?

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