

Students stressed with overbooked schedules

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At a time when more American high school students are applying to universities than ever before and college graduates are competing for jobs on a global level, an advanced English class at Boulder High School can seem like a pretty big deal to the average teen.

"I have most A.P. or advanced classes - five out of six," Boulder High junior Hannah Berman, 16, said last week after registering for the 2008-09 school year. "I can't imagine how stressful it's going to be, but I'm trying to do all the things that colleges want." Many students returning this week to Boulder Valley and St. Vrain Valley schools will be thrust back into a hectic schedule booked with back-to-back appointments: Start with before-school sports practices, include long school days and finish with after-class band rehearsals, evening athletic events, night jobs and, of course, hours of homework.

"With college applications and SATs and volleyball all at the same time, I get pretty stressed," said Boulder High junior Meaghan Dugger, 16.

The pace of student life that's sent teens running to keep up has administrators, teachers and parents fretting about students' juggling abilities, said Francie Anhut, CEO of Impact on Education, a foundation that supports Boulder Valley schools.

"Today's students are totally over-scheduled," Anhut said. "My generation of parents has pushed kids to do more and excel more, and globalization also has upped the ante in terms of pressure to succeed."

The fast pace of today's student lives can be good because "that's the world they're preparing themselves for," Anhut said. But it also can be bad, she said, because students are so booked they're "missing the opportunity to use their initiative and creativity to design their lives."

According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, parents can help their teens manage stress by watching for changes in behavior, supporting their involvement in social activities and modeling stress-management skills.

Students can help themselves by exercising and eating healthy food; avoiding caffeine, drugs and alcohol; combating negative and self-defeating thoughts; and taking a break - or a walk - from stressful situations.

Boulder High junior Jessica Imhoff, 15, said she tries to fit friend-time between two- to three-hour track practices and four- to five-hour study sessions.

"And then I get up around 6 a.m.," she said. "Å

Why so stressed?

A swelling pool of international job candidates is just one of the reasons Anhut gives for why today's students might feel more pressure to succeed. They're also in one of the largest graduating classes in U.S. history, meaning there are more students vying for a limited number of college admission slots; they're being asked to absorb more knowledge than previous high-schoolers; and universities want them to be well-rounded.

"Those are some of the factors fueling this kind of increase in kids being absolutely scheduled to the hilt," Anhut said.

The growing pressure on students has been explained in a YouTube video circulating the Internet. The eight-minute short called "Shift Happens" - created by an educator in Littleton - explains how American students are falling behind their Asian and Indian counterparts in academic performance while the amount of information being created and taught is growing exponentially.

"It is estimated that a week's worth of New York Times contains more information than a person was likely to come across in a lifetime in the 18th century," a video narrator says. "The amount of new technical information is doubling every two years. That means, for a student starting a four-year technical or college degree, half of what they learn in their first year of study will be outdated by their third year."

Former secretary of education Richard Riley is quoted in the video as saying that the top 10 in-demand jobs in 2010 are expected to be ones that didn't exist in 2004.

"We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist, using technologies that haven't been invented, in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet," the narrator says in the video.

The growing amount of information and the increasing speed at which it's spreading "has created the legitimate sense in kids that they have to keep up with it all," Anhut said.

And, she said, students no longer are challenged to be better than just the job applicants in their school or town. They must be atop a global pool of applicants.

"Already they're doing resume building and looking at how to differentiate themselves from others who have top grades," Anhut said.

If today's students did have to compete only with their peers in the United States, that too would be more challenging than it's been for previous students.

According to America's Student Loan Providers, the number of high school graduates increased 5 percent between 2005 and

2008, and the class of 2008 was the largest high school class in U.S. history, with nearly 3.2 million graduates.

"These kids have a more competitive situation," Anhut said. "Å

How to cope?

According to the Boulder County Youth Risk Behavior Survey - which polls teenagers about drug and alcohol abuse, depression and other risky behaviors - stress can drive a student to become overwhelmed and rebel or seek relief in a substance.

Education advocates have made it a priority to teach students stress-management skills and techniques to prioritize their lives so that teens avoid burnout at an early age.

Fairview junior Cassie Sokolowski, 16, said she's been balancing two-a-day volleyball tryouts with long work shifts, and when school starts this week she plans to keep her summer job while trying to maintain high marks in advanced courses and help her volleyball squad.

"But I'm just 16, and I want to have a life," Sokolowski said. "With work and volleyball and school, it depends on if my grades start slipping. I love having money and the work experience, but if it's not working for me, I'll have to let it go."

That sort of discretion and self-management is what Boulder High Principal Bud Jenkins said his staff encourages in students. He said administrators want to push teens to achieve their potential.

"But we don't want to put them over the edge," Jenkins said. "It's that special time in kids' lives when they're not really adults yet. They're still under their parents' wings, so we want them to be challenged but have fun."

Freshmen in both the Boulder Valley and St. Vrain districts are offered time-management advice and given resources to help them cope with the added responsibility and pressure that comes with high school.

Counselors at some schools are encouraging teens to take art and music enrichment courses, rather than all academic classes. And several education advocates have pushed for a longer school year to give students more time to absorb the growing amount of information they're asked to learn.

Fairview junior Caroline Hager, 16, said the pace right now is manageable, but she's nervous about the stress her junior year will bring, and she envies, to some extent, students before her time.

"It's kind of going to be overwhelming."

Archived comments

These kids will be corporate zombies and heading for a midlife crisis by 30. Slow down children and think about what we only get once...life. Don't be sorry you didn't take a breather a little more often. Boy Boulder has changed a lot. WTH

cgjj1@excite.com

8/17/2008 1:21:04 AM

I cannot believe I'm reading this nonsense. Why is it that educators today want to turn out a bunch of namby pamby kids with no work ethic? My sons all excelled in their studies, 2 were outstanding swimmers in their high schools (and 1 got an academic and athletic scholarship to Boston Univ) being at the pool at 5:30 a.m. every morning and swimming until 7 p.m. at night; they also had part time jobs they worked and they helped out at home. They did very well in life because they learned a work ethic, that nothing is free in life and success in life is achieved by hard work. They understood that then and even more so now.

Maybe the writer of this article is over stressed.....

ultrarunner@yahoo.com

8/17/2008 5:40:29 AM

Again we awake this morning to see that the DC journalists have managed to stir the normal everyday American life into a crisis....and a story. This is not a crisis of stress....and it shouldn't even be a story.... it's a wonderful life full of choices here in America. Choices the rest of the world still envies. Be happy you didn't have to crawl under a fence in the dead of night to get here....many have....just to have our stress of choices.

rlh343

8/17/2008 5:45:44 AM

Having 3 daughters, 2 who recently graduated and 1 in High School - it's not that bad. Yes they're pretty busy but they do have free time too. And for those students that do manage to have lots of free time - guess what they spend a lot of that free time doing...

david@thielen.com

8/17/2008 6:54:48 AM

its mostly due to parents who don't want the kids in the house.

boulderhippie

8/17/2008 7:00:24 AM

This article left ME stressed. However, I remember high school being one of the best times of my life. My time in extra-curricular activities and work WAS my social time. I enjoyed being nonstop active. My parents wanted me to spend more time at home, but I remember asking "Why? So I can watch TV with you?" Oh, to have that level of energy again!

monkeys

8/17/2008 7:45:31 AM

College kids are stupid today anyway.

I've met more of these kids my age that never progressed beyond the age of 16. Sure, they are "smart" but if you try to get them to think critically about their surroundings for more than a minute, their heads will explode.

Seriously, has anyone gone down to CU lately and interviewed some of these people? They are IDIOTS! I've met more art and business majors in the last two weeks than I ever have in the rest of my life. You know what most of these kids do for a year after they get out of college? They work at restaurants and quite possibly end up working there until their brains fall out.

College's these days are a flipping joke as are the kids that attend them.

TurboPotato

8/17/2008 7:54:55 AM

AWWWWWW...CRY ME A GODDAMN RIVER!!!!

ROLL A JOINT AND GET YOUR A\$\$ OFF TO SCHOOL!

MisterPist

8/17/2008 8:07:53 AM

The essence of this story applies to every moment. Nothing I haven't heard over and over since I was a teenager; and that's a long time ago. Although the NYTimes stat was an eye-opener.

Hey DC, can you add the Story Tools to this so I can email it? Thanks.

bnorthrop

8/17/2008 9:44:06 AM

some kids and parents are into that kind of life. some aren't. personally, i'm tired of the conformity and the media portrayal of how important it is.

s4burf

8/17/2008 10:17:25 AM

BVSD has a million options academically and outside the classroom. That is what makes it such a great school district.

Comments about global applicants serve only to scare kids and their parents who then push them needlessly. My kids loved their BVSD days, colleges, and current jobs. Books and columns like those by Judith Warner, and the comment here re to NYT article are unsubstantiated. Who can spell neurotic? Kids should be stressed appropriately and learn to work hard, and they will think it is fun if the adults aren't identifying it as "stress".

framilite

8/17/2008 10:39:25 AM

Former secretary of education Richard Riley is quoted in the video as saying that the top 10 in-demand jobs in 2010 are expected to be ones that didn't exist in 2004.

Question: Then WHY are our students filling in bubbles on high stakes test? Why is more time than ever spent prepping for the test? Why are kids kept from recess to test prep?

Question the NLCB Law and high stakes testing!

Question why parents aren't spending time with their children playing in dirt, planting flowers, etc. Why so much ORGANIZED competitive activities? Why are the school bus schedules driving school start and end times? Oh, money, I get it. It's always about money and who is the TOP dog.

Why shopping center schools? Why are the standardistos, politicians, and business folks making policy? Oh, it's money again.

Take a look at school standards documents. These standards are nuts? Weigh the textbooks? And it's money one more time.

Don't blame professional educators, blame those who's national past time is bashing teachers.

Read Naomi Klein's Shock Wave. It's nuts out there.

hanalei@indra.com

8/17/2008 11:21:32 AM

they're being asked to absorb more knowledge than previous high-schoolers; and universities want them to be well-rounded.

How true. Why, at Boulder high alone, students are expected to try a wide variety of drugs while simultaneously engaging in sexual experimentation involving a myriad of moist positions with peers who represent as many gender orientations as you can count on two hands.

It must be hard keeping all of that straight - did I just take a red? Or was that mom's Xanax? And what was the name of that guy I hooked up with (translation: blew) last weekend? - while writing reports on why America should be more like Cuba and organizing student protests against reciting the Declaration of Independence (what ever happened to that poor little girl-tool anyway? Did her parents finally decide to let her put her Communist studies on hold so she could graduate?).

Busy bees, indeed.

Reader1

8/17/2008 12:03:24 PM

This 60 Minutes report shows that 4 hrs sleep a night for just 6 nights puts people in a pre-diabetic state, among other dangers
http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/03/14/60minutes/main3939721_page4.shtml
Zoologists say most higher animals "work" 15-20 hours a week. Similarly for indigenous people. We didn't evolve to work 40-80 hour weeks. No wonder it makes people sick.

EvanFromHeaven

8/17/2008 4:57:25 PM

"Run, rabbit, run.
Dig that hole. Forget the sun.
And when, at last, the work is done,
Don't sit down, it's time to dig another one."
-Pink Floyd
Such is life. Better they learn that now, before they get to college.

Danimal

8/17/2008 11:35:18 PM

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