

High grades, high stress for Asian-American students in Bay Area

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Senior T.J. Wey says she does "pretty well" at Mission San Jose High School in Fremont.

That means straight A's so far this year at a school that boasts the eighth-highest test scores in the state — and where students and teachers both joke about the "Asian grade scale":

A = Average; B = Bad; C = Catastrophe; D = Disowned; F = Forever Forgotten.

They may just be kidding, but there's some truth lurking below: Many Asian parents, especially well-educated immigrants, set sky-high expectations for their children. And while that drive to achieve has put Asian students as a group at the top of the class, it's also forcing some uncomfortable conversations within the Asian community about the damage those demands may cause.

At Mission in the Fremont Unified School District, where 75 percent of the student body is Asian, a majority of students think their parents' expectations are too high, according to a survey conducted a year ago. More alarming, half of the 1,175 kids answering the survey showed signs of depression or burnout.

And matching national estimates, the survey showed that 80 percent have cheated on homework and 70 percent have cheated on tests.

As the nation stresses over how to ratchet up test scores and close the ethnic achievement gap — where Asians and whites markedly outscore black and Latino students — "high expectations" have become an educational mantra. The higher the bar is set at home, as well as at school, the better students perform, educators believe.

But among those in the top tier, the discussion is shifting.

"At Mission San Jose High, the competition is so fierce, the pressure so big, it's terrible," said Linsia Wey, T.J.'s mother. "It depresses students. Most of them are crying 'SOS!' inside their hearts."

She laments the lack of a middle ground at Mission, between demands that are too high and too low. "I want her to be challenged, but not to the point where it's so competitive."

Heavy workload

At a recent workshop run by Mission SOS, a student-run project to reduce stress and improve integrity, students cited workload and expectations as reasons why they cut corners.

"It's desperation," said Rebecca Holland, 17, a senior, explaining what students do to meet the academic expectation. "Sometimes you're trapped and you have to live up to it."

With juniors and seniors typically taking three or four advanced-placement or honors courses, students simply don't have time to complete all the work, they said, and use online literature shortcuts like SparkNotes.

The worry is not just that students stay up too late or distort their ethics. It's also the threats posed to their mental and physical well-being.

In the 25-to-34 age group, Asian-Americans have the highest proportion of suicides as a cause of death — 16.8 percent — of any racial group, according to Eliza Noh, assistant professor of Asian-American studies at California State University-Fullerton, who has researched suicide. The alarming numbers are often related to high family and social expectations, she said.

Asian-American students internalize those expectations, she said. "If they don't fulfill it, they feel there's something wrong with them."

Noh has a tragic understanding of the issue: Her older sister took her own life as a college student 18 years ago, after struggling with those pressures.

Ivy Wu, a Fremont Unified trustee and Mission parent, understands family expectations: "It's the kind of pressure I was trying to escape," said the immigrant from Taiwan. "It's not that parents are evil and want their kids to suffer. They want for their kids more than they have for themselves."

But sometimes, "pressure from parents has pushed kids past the point where they can cope," said Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu, professor of Asian-American studies at Stanford University.

Mission decided to tackle the pressure head on. It is hosting parent-education nights with speakers on student mental health. Teachers are now coordinating so they don't all give tests on the same day. They also have posted signs in classrooms inviting students to share their concerns. The school is considering a block schedule so not every class meets every day, thereby easing homework pressure.

Martha Kreeger, outreach coordinator of Mission SOS, a project of the Stanford-founded Challenge Success, believes that the most important move would be to strengthen the teacher-student connection. "If you make a connection with adults on campus, then cheating goes down."

New priorities

The goal is not only to reduce student stress in high school, but also to equip them for the pressures of college and afterward, she said.

"SOS wants to help parents understand that success doesn't lie in pushing your kids for higher and higher achievement," Wu said. "Parents need to be partners with their kids, to learn along with them, fail along with them."

Some parents are already on board. A few years ago, Manju Kanthilal pulled her daughter Dipti off the high-stress track at Mission. The family was trying to plan a vacation to Guatemala, and their three children objected to missing a day of school.

That's when they decided that their priorities were somehow unbalanced, she said. "We make sure they get their homework done, but we don't push them to take more classes just because someone else is doing that."

Dipti was reluctant. "At first, I was like, I want to take it all," she said. "I wanted to overload" because her friends were.

While dad Kanti Bhabuthmal is a hardware engineer and Manju is an accountant-turned-stay-at-home-mom, they believe in education through travel and in doing things as a family. Even soccer was getting too competitive for their younger daughter, Anjali, and against her wishes they forced her to drop down to a recreational league.

All that makes sense to mental-health professionals. In working with parents, it's a challenge to introduce the notion of "emotional intelligence," said CJ Chien of Saratoga, whose group Inner Growth puts on workshops helping Asian-American parents — in both Chinese and English — better understand their children and improve communication.

Murphy-Shigematsu says he suggests that parents ask themselves some hard questions. "If you do, it becomes pretty clear that your son doesn't need to be a doctor just because your older brother's kid is a doctor."

The question parents should ask themselves is, "What are you doing for the good of the child, and what are you doing for your own good?"

At Mission, T.J. just finished her college applications, defending in essays why she's not taking AP science and dropped down from honors math. She also declined to say where she is applying so people don't judge her through that, too. But, she said, "being in an environment where everyone else is freaking out, the pressure is hard to avoid."

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Manisha Kanthilal, 21, mother Manju Kanthilal, father Kanti Bhabuthmal, aunt Shashi Khajanchi, uncle Surendar Khajanchi, sister Dipti Kanthilal, 17, and sister Anjali Kanthilal, 12, spend Sunday evening together at home in Fremont December 21, 2008.

(MARIA J. AVILA/MERCURY NEWS)

Dealing with STUDENT stress: web resources

Mission SOS: www.missionsos.net

Stanford University School of Education's Challenge Success: www.challengesuccess.org

Mission San Jose senior Derek Wong's video investigating the implications of bias, stereotypes and intense expectations in high school:

[video.google.com/videoplay?docid=1131252213903301245&hl=en](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1131252213903301245)

Clemson University Center for Academic Integrity: www.academicintegrity.org

Promoting Integration of Education and Health Research (Group with a focus on Asian American parenting): www.pieducationandhealth.org