

Post Magazine: Stressed Out Students

Denise Clark Pope, Stanford University; Alexandra Robbins, Author; Martha Kreeger, Parent
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In her story in **The Washington Post Magazine** Education Review, Post Metro reporter **Lori Aratani** travels to northern California, where stressed out high school students, their parents and teachers are getting a [crash course](#) on navigating the pressures of applying to college.

Today's discussion is a roundtable featuring **Denise Clark Pope**, a founder of Stanford University's Stressed Out Students (SOS) conferences; **Martha Kreeger**, a parent member of the Mission San Jose (Calif.) High School team; and **Alexandra Robbins**, author of "The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids."

[Submit your questions and comments](#) before or during today's discussion.

Martha Kreeger: Hello, thank you for inviting me here today. My name is Martha Kreeger and I am a parent member of the Mission San Jose High School SOS team. I have two children, a junior and an eight grader at a very competitive, high stress school here in California and we are in the process of changing our school culture to try and reduce excessive stress in our community.

Denise Clark Pope: Hi this is Denise Pope. I am the founder and director of the SOS: Stressed-Out Students Project at Stanford University. I look forward to answering your questions.

Alexandra Robbins: Hi, I'm the author of "The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids." I've been lecturing at high schools and colleges about these issues pretty much non-stop for the last year. Ask away!

Washington, DC: A friend in CA mentioned that the biggest competition are Asia-American kids because of cultural reasons, are doing too well academic. He didn't speak it out because of racism. How do you explain the different cultural academic differences in SOS?

Martha Kreeger: Our high school is almost eighty percent Asian, primarily from Chinese and Indian descent. Many of the kids are very well prepared academically and their family expectations are high, but one of the concerns the students on our SOS team have are the stereotypes that just pile on the pressure and make this situation even more intense. As one of them said, "try being the Asian student making the "C". One of our goals this year is to talk about these attitudes, and try to dispel the myths that make it difficult to work as a team at school.

Alexandra Robbins: From a non-SOS point of view, I'd just like to point out that Asian-American is not the only culture with the sometimes single-minded focus on educational success. Last week I gave a lecture about educational stress to parents and students in Nebraska, where I met a Nigerian man who told me that Mrs. AP Frank (an unbelievably pressuring parent in my book) would be the norm in his hometown.

Denise Clark Pope: One thing that is different here in the US than in some other countries is the opportunity to re-invent yourself almost at any time. I could go to medical school if I wanted to -- go back to college and take classes etc. So some cultures do not understand that their children have lots of chances to succeed. It's not just based on high school achievement...

Lawrence, Kan.: I really loved reading Alexandra Robbins' book, *THE OVERACHIEVERS: THE SECRET LIVES OF DRIVEN KIDS*, and would like to ask her this question: Do you think that the issues concerning stressed students are limited to places like Montgomery County and the particular pocket of Northern California that Lori Aratani writes about?

Alexandra Robbins: I wondered about that when I began reporting the book, especially because so many of the students I met spoke of the stress of living in what they called the "Bethesda bubble" (which conveniently also includes Northern Virginia). So I went across the country and had group interviews with students in regions that were as far from Montgomery County as I could get, including, for example, a rural, underprivileged town in eastern New Mexico. I found then, and this is something that has been reinforced on my lecture circuit, that students are stressed in every part of the country that I have visited. Sometimes the stresses vary - the "hot" schools might differ, the financial weight might be heavier - but in every town I speak, school and college stress is there and it seems to be getting worse.

Arlington, VA: To gain admission to a top-ranked college, is it better to be an average student at a top-ranked high school or a top-ranked student at an average high school? Put another way, what do college admissions offices consider to be the more important factor, the rigor of the high school environment or the grades/scores of the individual student? Thanks.

Alexandra Robbins: It is better to be a happy, healthy student. Period.

Admissions is a crapshoot. The "rankings" are a sham. I'll spare you my full spiel, but the bottom line is that where you go to college is not nearly as important as what you do when you get there, and how you feel and what you know about yourself as an individual when you leave.

Denise Clark Pope: I completely agree with Alexandra. College admissions officers are looking for the best match between their school and the applicants. You should take classes that interest and challenge you, while finding time to be healthy, get enough sleep, participate in an activity or 2 that you enjoy. You'll get into a college that is a good match for you. Forget the rankings --

and take a look at the Washington Monthly new rankings to show you just how random these lists are!

Princeton, NJ: Actually Denise, the US is way behind some countries in providing education for older people who want to change fields. A number of years ago I attended a conference in Sweden at a school whose sole purpose was that, and it was free. How many people in the US could afford to give up their job and go back to Med School?

Denise Clark Pope: I couldn't agree with you more. Thanks for this point -- and check out Finland as well. They don't start teaching reading in school until kids are ready -- and they have one of the highest literacy rates in the world!

Washington, DC: I think the argument that kids are prepping too much for college and are too busy in high school is false when put in terms with the real world. I'm a recent college graduate and am currently working full time and going to graduate school part time (like many in this area). In a demanding job, my days often begin-at the office- at 7 or 8am and can stretch to 10 pm at work, or the same when I have class two days a week, or to 12, 1 or 2 am if I have a major reading or paper or assignment due for class. Isn't it better to be busy in high school than to work less and have shorter days? The simple fact is that this is not the reality, the reality is long hours and multiple responsibilities. The busier you are in high school, the more prepared you will be for the real world.

Martha Kreeger: I appreciate your comments, adults are busy, especially here in Silicon Valley with all the start ups and crazy hours. But technology changes so fast, and learning to think, and thinking outside the box is not something you learn from books necessarily. These are young adults who do not have experiential learning, but maturation is a process that takes time. What do you say to the kids who pull all nighters for oral reports, as if that report is as important as a final exam? Where is their perspective? Teachers don't expect that most of the time. It's surprising that they feel the need to make such drastic choices. As we grow older we understand that freedom of choice comes with increased responsibility. Adults recognize this compromise, our students do not.

Denise Clark Pope: Also, it's important to remember that kids are not mini-adults. They have very different developmental needs -- even in high school -- from adults. They need 9.5 hours of sleep EACH night as high school student, their brains are not fully developed, and their bodies are still changing and maturing. We should not do things that are unhealthy. They'll be ready for "reality" soon enough.

Virginia: Hello. My son graduated from HS last year and he enrolled in a big good university in VA. But he was more stressed out when the liberal professors rejected his conservative views. So

he transferred to another university more in tune with him. No wonder the rate of female undergraduates nationwide is like 65%. IMO, boys are more stressed out.

Alexandra Robbins: I have to disagree, respectfully. I've talked to thousands of college and high school students about stress, and I haven't found that one gender is more stressed than the other. I think there are all types of potential contributors, from external pressures to attitude and self esteem to interests and talents (for example, artists might be able to work more often on their own timetable, while athletes have specific mandatory practice and game obligations). But gender isn't one of them, at least in my experience.

Martha Kreeger: Are boys more stressed out? I have one of each gender and i believe they are both stressed, for different reasons, but those reasons are more connected with how they learn and how they process what is going on in their lives than in what gender they are. Both have had anxiety issues, sleeping problems, stomach aches and panic attacks. We are working to lower those symptoms. I'm a big fan of dealing with kids as individuals.

Virginia: I think the thing many kids and parents just do not get is that it really doesn't matter WHERE you go to college, it's WHAT you do while you're there. Plenty of dropouts at Harvard, and plenty of Fulbright scholars from George Mason. What's the big deal about big name schools? I went to private schools, undergrad and grad, and sure, my schools were "highly regarded" but my husband, who went to the local state school, had Nobel prize winning professors on staff (my schools didn't that year). We both graduated as literate, functioning adults capable of earning a paycheck in our chosen fields.

Another thing is that once you go to college and graduate, you realize that high school is WAY less important that everyone made you think it was when you were there. In the college and grown-up words, nobody cares if you lettered in three sports and were president of every honor society known to man. Your employer won't give you a raise because you were all-county in track. They just want to see if you can get the job done.

Martha Kreeger: I agree! Before kids I was a speaker for a career development firm out of the DC area. In my experience, employers valued competence and leadership far more than they value what you have on paper and that was what I communicated to students across the country entering the job market. Your college degree may get you in the door, but it is your personality and accomplishments that make you successful.

Florida: Just to point out how bad it's gotten, my oldest child is in elementary school (one of the top-performing ones in the state, located in the middle of a very wealthy area), and she's - already- getting pressure from school and family to do well so that she can get into a good college.

I'd find it amusing if it weren't so horrifying (and heartbreaking at times, as I watch her reacting to the pressure). Of course, I have my own history to look back on--I came close to not graduating from a struggling high school and flunked out of college, but ended up getting my bachelor's from a state college and then my PhD from an Ivy--and so I know from personal experience that you don't have to excel at any particular educational level to do well at another.

But how do I communicate this to my daughters? It's all well and good to recognize that there's a problem, but I feel like I'm fighting against the collective weight of the entire educational establishment (if not all of American middle- and upper-class culture), and it's exhausting, and so some words of encouragement and advice would be welcome.

Martha Kreeger: As a parent I can relate to worrying about the stress in our children's lives. It's tough to make these choices. My kids had hours of homework in elementary school, sometimes staying up until midnight. At a certain point I began to red line the work and send it back with a note saying that we were done and had made the decision to go to bed. Jim Lobdell said it best at the SOS conference when he suggested we find a network of support at the school, in the neighborhood and at home to make these very tough choices. As parents these are the choices we make, and it is our job to accept the consequences. How much stress my child has is the choice I make, and if she does not get into Stanford, well then that is our consequence. In reality I have no idea where she is going, I just want her to grow and become the kind of person who can make healthy choices, and that in itself is the education I want her to have, where she goes to school will not give her that. How she grows and develops in this time, that gives her that strength.

Alexandra Robbins: Yes, I've heard similar things about elementary school - parents and teachers are even finding students cheating at elementary school field day! At a Montgomery County elementary school, a parent who was new to the school district was approached by another parent, who said, "Which tutor are you using?" The first parent explained that her child was bright and not having any difficulties in the classroom, so was not using a tutor. The second parent said, "Oh, no, the bright students are the ones who need the tutors, because everyone has one and they'll fall behind." These kids were in *kindergarten*.

Actually, I think being aware of this madness is a good motivation to opt out of it. Certain parents are signing up their kids for private preschools, expecting that those schools will feed into good private elementary schools, from there into successful private high schools, and straight on to that "top-ranked college." Preschool directors told me they get calls about admissions from parents in the hospital who have just given birth, and even from people who call just after conception! Imagine the pressure on the child, and how disappointed she will feel if she doesn't get into that college tier, knowing that her whole life has been geared toward that single acceptance letter.

It sounds a little bit trite, but parents can always emphasize character over performance. One of the nuggets I found that most surprised me was that a number of students believe that their parents would rather they cheat and get an A than do the work honestly and not get an A. Another cliched-but-true tip: many, many students told me that even though they knew their parents loved them unconditionally, no matter how well they did on a test or in an athletic match, or where they got into school, they still could not hear that enough.

Eep, sorry, that wasn't an answer; that was an essay.

Denise Clark Pope: One quick addition: we do workshops with schools on homework -- what is appropriate, purposeful work and how much to expect from kids in different grades. You can be an advocate at the school and at home. We have seen entire communities turned around when parents and teachers work together on "healthy" homework levels.

USA: I teach at a community college, and the students' backgrounds are generally about what you would expect. Many of their parents aren't even real clear on the whole concept of college (although they generally realize it's a good thing).

They're expected to navigate the system with a lot less family and institutional support than your students at Stanford.

This is absolutely not an attack on Stanford students (not all of whom are from privileged backgrounds, I realize). And I completely appreciate that the stress they feel is very real.

But I can't help thinking that it's somehow not right that many students who would seem to have a lot of advantages anyway receive a higher level of support than students who really don't have anybody in their corner.

Again, this is not an attack on you, on Stanford, or on your students.

But it does seem wrong, somehow.

Have you considered this issue? Do you have any comments?

Denise Clark Pope: You make an excellent point. We know that students in community college need support from parents and teachers -- just as students everywhere do. We are also quite worried about the drop-out rate at community colleges. We advocate better counseling at high school and community colleges to help students see that they CAN complete the AA degree and to offer them the support they need to decide if they want to go on to 4 year colleges. Sometimes the best way to get into a 4 year university is to start at a community college!

Martha Kreeger: You know, Denise makes an excellent point. A far higher percentage of kids applying to Berkeley from Community College get into Berkeley as juniors, than students applying straight out of high school. Ken Gonsalves, an admissions counselor at Berkeley told us at our first SOS event, "De-stressing College Admissions" that those kids have proven themselves already and that maturity was a factor in their admittance.

Fort Washington, MD: How do you avoid or reduce the stress that has freshmen students as worried as we parents were in our senior year of high school? I and a friend are not buying into

the stress. Too many colleges and universities exist that fit a multitude of students. And I figure that if a student doesn't like the college he/she can change. The majority of students will be ok and do great. I once heard an advisor say to a parent and high school student "Can you see yourself or child living here for four or five years?" Maybe that is the first question to ask.

Martha Kreeger: This is true. Times have changed and I'm not even suggesting my daughter apply to the University my husband and I attended. She would need to take far more APs to even get considered at Duke. As a ninth grader, it does seem as if kids have to get straight A's. At our school, you are barely in the top fifty percent with a 3.5. It's tough. As a parent, I encouraged my daughter to manage her stress through running with cross-country and track. The kids on the teams are great, fun loving kids and running 2 - 5 miles per day has been a great manager of stress. Our SOS program is also attempting to make a cultural shift and we are making presentations to the elementary schools that feed into our junior high and high school. These parents are invited to our events, and we want to make choices at a younger age to reduce and manage academic stress.

Alexandra Robbins: Fort Washington, that is a wonderful point that so many families forget. Students can transfer! Your college decisions are not set in stone!

An interesting note - I spoke to a ton of college counselors who told me that the clients they had who were most likely to transfer colleges were the students who had worked themselves silly to get into a name-brand school . . . and then discovered once they got there that the college wasn't a good fit. you really can't judge a school by its name.

Denise Clark Pope: Glad to hear you aren't buying into the stress! There are also important things you can do each day to send this message to others. We advocate a "college free" zone where you and your students don't discuss SAT scores, college applications, where you are applying, etc. with anyone outside of the immediate family. We also ask that parents watch how they discuss grades with their kids. Even something as minor as asking "how did you do on the test today?" is sending a message that grades matter more than anything else in high school. Don't buy into the stress by not feeding the frenzy. Good luck!

Arlington, VA: Hi. I was wondering if the focus on pre-college achievement is a regional cultural thing? I grew up in Illinois, and don't think a single kid from my high school ever went to an Ivy League. Now that we live on the East Coast, it seems that our culture here is more focused both on conspicuous consumption and conspicuous achievement...I expect to the detriment of our kids. We're moving to Alaska next year, and I'm relieved that my kids won't have to worry about saying up until 1am to do their 4th grade homework. I expect that there are HR folks who swoon over an Ivy League degree, but is a Bachelor's degree really that different between, say, the University of Missouri and Yale?

Denise Clark Pope: As Alexandra mentions above, we do see this kind of stress and "conspicuous achievement" all over the US -- even in Illinois where I work with 2 schools, but you hit on an important point. There are a few studies that show that you can go to over 200

colleges and still have the same success as the Ivy League grads. Krueger and Dale looked at students who went to non-Ivy schools and compared them to those that went to Ivies for undergrad, and they found no difference in salaries, success rate, status -- even 10 years later.

Alexandra Robbins: Denise is right. I cite that study all the time - and I believe they followed the graduates for 20 years, which is great.

I've heard from a lot of students in Illinois, specifically, that there is a huge focus in many areas there on pre-college achievement. (Coincidentally, I'm lecturing there tomorrow.) New Trier is one example of an Illinois high school that is battling these issues.

As I mentioned before, the hot schools can differ by the region, but there are usually those types of colleges (the one that many of a school's top students are competing to get into) everywhere. On the East Coast, the Ivy League, Duke, and Stanford are often the hot schools, but Texans might be competing to get into UT or Rice, Georgians into the University of Georgia, Virginia's into UVA... I'll be interested to know what you find in Alaska.

Towson, Md: I am appalled at the pressure applied by parents and teachers on these students. My son (now a senior in college) was a laid-back high school student with good grades but no "resume" of activities. He applied to two of the smaller in-state colleges, and he actually refused to write an essay on the applications "because it's not required". He now has a 3.5 GPA, a good social life, and only \$3000 in student loan debt. I'm proud of him!

Denise Clark Pope: Hooray! We need more folks like you and your son to get this kind of message. Spread the word!

Washington, DC: I firmly believe this pressure has to stop, and it has to come from ALL levels: students, parents, schools, colleges. From the time you enter high school, you are led to believe that not only going to college, but WHERE to go to college is going to make or break your entire future.

I am only 3.5 years out of college and already I can see that people's colleges, majors, and GPAs are nearly irrelevant. It is much more important to utilize your time at whatever institution you attend to develop your skills, grow as a person, and set some professional goals.

(And yes, I realize that for the minority of students pursuing specialized careers, your school and your grade are much more significant.)

Denise Clark Pope: We agree with you, and that's why you have to send an entire TEAM from your school when you come to a conference at SOS at Stanford. We require a principal, a teacher, a counselor, a parent, and at least 2 students to attend. We also work with college

admissions officers to make sure they understand their role in this frenzy. It's a systemic problem, and it will take a "village" of all stakeholders to turn the problem around.

Martha Kreeger: At Mission San Jose High School we have a lot of growing support from the different stake holder groups, teachers, administration, students and parents. And not just at your high school, but from your feeder schools, those families are the same families that parent the high school kids. The students are driving the change, but without the support of the rest of the community, how can systemic changes be made? And once those changes are made, will it be enough? Colleges and Universities ultimately are the gatekeepers for our kids. They help drive the stress and have a responsibility in this process as well. We all have a piece of this puzzle, it's not about blame, it's about generating solutions. At Mission, we are committing to the change, and we hope the rest of community follows.

Princeton, NJ: What Alexandra and Denise say about the school not mattering is a popular opinion, but I am a mathematician and the great majority of successful mathematicians come from a tiny group of schools. It is really hard to succeed in graduate school if you don't have an undergraduate education from a place where the faculty is actively involved in research.

Denise Clark Pope: I don't know the math field, so you are probably right, but we have evidence from many other fields that this is not the case. Students from all kinds of schools succeed in graduate school.

Alexandria, VA: In the article Ms. Aratani says that the root cause of the anxiety is fear: fear that if your child doesn't get in to a heavyweight university, he or she will be unemployed, unemployable, homeless and starving (and, by extension, unable to care for you when you get old and feeble). Do you agree with this argument? If so, how do you work against that fear when it comes up in your work with parents and students?

Martha Kreeger: Okay, the fear statement was mine and I feel this all the time. In many conversations with other parents its like being back in school myself, afraid I'm going to make a huge mistake. Parents ask each other, so what is your child doing this summer, or where do you think she will apply to school and my gut tightens and I begin to sweat. Its a competitive feeling that SOS and our team is helping with. When we get asked these questions its great to make a reality check, is this question really that important? Where my child decides to apply to college is her choice, and her information to release and should be based on what she wants from a college experience. After all, her successes are not mine. She is her own person. And her disappointments are also not mine. I'm there because she is a gift and I am lucky to be with her, and really, my job except for support and compassion is kind of done. So where she is going to college, a good answer might be, I'll know when she tells me.

New Brunswick, NJ: There are so many good schools that these students won't even consider! Because status - perception - is all in today's society.

Do you think the students and their parents believe that the US has become a more aristocratic society, where contacts - "who you know" - are more important than an education and an enjoyable time at college?

And, if so, are they correct? I understand that social mobility is falling.

Martha Kreeger: I think it is often "who you know" as opposed to "what you know". There is an element of undeniable truth, when you say that you went to a Harvard, or Stanford, or Duke, or Dartmouth, it does say something about you and how well you prepared at a young age to enter that institution. Does this mean you will be more successful? I'm not so sure. It may increase your access to opportunities, but it does not necessarily guarantee you the result you want to have. What do I really want for my children? I want them to be able to handle what life throws at them and to not live at home.

Alexandra Robbins: I'd like to make a quick point that people often forget. So often, I hear from parents who say that they want their children to get into a certain school (Harvard, etc.) because of the supposed "network," because of the expected connections. But those connections are everywhere! Every college has an alumni network, and you never know where you might bump into someone who might be more likely to help you because you share an alma mater. Texas is an example of a state in which many employers are rumored to favor students who went to in-state schools, for example. So a Harvard degree might not get you that fabled edge at some of those companies (in fact, many employers nationwide have told me about a backlash against Ivy League grads).

Indeed, with the who-you-know logic, it would make more sense to go to a large university than a prestigious one, because you will have the alumni connection with more people.

Potomac, MD: Hi there. I admit: I haven't read the article yet. However, I find myself wondering about the basis for finding that kids are so much more stressed out now than they were years ago. I finished HS twenty-five years ago. I went to a very large, very diverse public HS (over 500 in my graduating class). Even taking into account the diversity, there were hundreds of kids competing to get into the "best" universities. It wasn't a cake-walk then.

Moreover, I often hear comments about how there are more kids applying now. But from what I can tell, colleges and universities are admitting MORE kids nowadays - to accommodate the fact that there are more kids applying to college now. My alma mater admits much larger entering classes than it did when I applied in the early 1980s.

Alexandra Robbins: It might not have been a cake-walk, but it was much easier to get into college then than it is now. Part of that is attributable to sheer numbers: between 2000 and 2005 alone, the number of students enrolling in college rose by more than 1.2 million. That's a heck of

a lot of added competition, and you'd better believe the students feel that pressure. There's also a renewed focus on the importance of name-brand prestige, and the high-stakes testing atmosphere; No Child Left Behind (don't get me started on that abomination) wasn't around when you were in high school.

Meanwhile, some selective schools are now admitting fewer than 10% of applicants.

The reason I followed students at Walt Whitman was because that was my alma mater. So I was able to observe, firsthand, that my own high school was definitely a more stressful, competitive, and frenzied place ten years after I had graduated. I don't mean to single out Whitman - focusing on students at one school was a narrative device - it's just an example of a nationwide trend. I promise you that it is more stressful for students now than it was when you were in high school.

Martha Kreeger: This was great! Thank you so much for having me, it was an honor and a pleasure.

Arlington, VA: I understand your concern, but in an increasingly global economy where a college degree is seen as the bare minimum for any white-collar (and increasingly blue-collar) jobs, what level of hard work should be encouraged? There's a wide gulf between spending hours on an oral report and doing no work at all.

Denise Clark Pope: You are absolutely right. We are not advocating for laziness or mediocrity! You want to strive for the "just-right challenge" -- where you know your child is working hard -- but not to the point of exhaustion and undue stress and anxiety. Too often we see kids who turn to substance abuse, self-mutilation, depression and sometimes suicide when they feel that they cannot achieve the expectations that parents, peers and teachers hoist upon them. You know your child best and should encourage a healthy level of challenge.

Denise Clark Pope: Thanks for asking great questions, and feel free to check out SOSconference.stanford.edu for more info on our program. Best, Denise

Alexandra Robbins: Thanks for the interesting and insightful questions, everyone!
