

**DENISE CLARK POPE, Ph.D. Stanford University School of Education**

*An excerpt from the Los Altos Town Crier by Eliza Ridgeway, February 7, 2007*

A carefully scrutinized grade-point average, extracurricular activities booked every second of the week, soccer game road trips every weekend - do you think Los Altos parent Denise Clark Pope was describing a typical high school senior? She was characterizing fourth-grade students. The Stanford University lecturer and researcher in the School of Education spoke to more than 450 parents . . . on "Life in the Fast Lane and How to Get Out."

Pope's book "Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed-Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students" (Yale University Press, 2003) examines a child's experience in the area's hypercompetitive, overcommitted school communities.

"Think about the (term) 'fast lane' - what (does) that mean?" Pope asked the audience. Parents called out responses: "taking four or five AP classes," "music and sports and arts" and "signing your kids up for activities just because their friends are doing it."

Pope described some survival strategies students adopt to "do school." Students "do school" to achieve all the marks of success, regardless of the cost or educational opportunities lost. Parents, and school systems that promote a single idea of success - getting into an Ivy League college, for instance - push them on without allowing for alternatives.

She asked the audience to guess the top two words students associated with school. "Bored" was number one, followed by "tired."

"They're robbed of the joy of learning, which is replaced with grades and tests," Pope said. "The system is not working. And kids are paying the toll."

Studies of student health list anxiety and depression, sleep deprivation, the abuse of drugs and alcohol, and suicide as some of the health risks facing students as young as middle and late elementary school.

"Nine- to 13-year-olds are more stressed by academics than anything else in their lives," Pope said. "And it tends to be a suburban problem."

Pope identified parental pressure as the primary source of the stress, but she did more than point a finger at the community. She offered advice and solutions, for individual parents and the school district as a whole.

Adolescents need 9.5 hours of sleep each night, elementary and early middle school students between 10 and 11 hours. Sleep deprivation leads to illness, impaired ability to learn and abuse of stimulants.

"It takes one caring adult to stop a suicide, but you have to know the signs," Pope said urgently. "If girls start wearing long sleeves all the time, they are cutting." She also listed a sustained change of affect or personality, dramatic change in friends, falling grades and severe fatigue as warning signs.

"Students feel hopeless, as though nothing is going to change, and as though nobody listens to them," she said.

She suggested that districts create a test and project calendar so that teachers don't overlap large assignments, schedule exams before winter vacation so families can get a genuine break and question the purpose of homework and the extent to which excess amounts require too much parental participation.

"There is zero correlation between homework in elementary school and academic achievement," Pope said.

Building responsibility improves achievement, but that can be achieved through other routes than a daily ditto sheet. She cited the ideal guidelines for elementary school homework, which should slowly increase from 10 minutes in first grade to a little more than an hour in middle school.

“Some parents say their kid’s doing four hours a night. Start a dialogue around homework, it sounds like you need it,” Pope said. “I would love to see a focus on project-based learning. It decreases cheating and increases the retention of information.

“Real science is messy. It doesn’t necessarily have to have a right answer,” Pope said. She suggested service-learning projects where students can do something they care about, like testing water quality, and see how their learning can make a difference in the world.

The problem with this plan, Pope acknowledges, is that projects don’t always teach to the test, and state-mandated achievement tests matter even for idealistic school districts and parents. Pope said schools can work around the challenge. She holds workshops for teachers on how to integrate test-specific knowledge into diverse curricula.

After describing ways the school system could change to combat stress and improve the genuine quality of education, Pope turned to parental solutions.

“Listen to your child. And your gut,” she said. “If you’re doing stuff you know is developmentally inappropriate, living life in the fast lane, you’ve got to get out. And get your family out.”

She asked the audience to examine their values. If a parent values honesty, why does he or she countenance a system in which children think a top grade is worth cheating for?

“(Parents) are defining success much too narrowly,” Pope said. “The No. 1 cause of a stressed-out kid is a stressed-out parent.”

She emphasized “PDF” - playtime, downtime and family time - and challenged parents to learn to say no to overscheduling the family. “Just because the opportunities are there doesn’t mean you have to go,” she said.

She advised parents to examine the subtle messages they send to students, verbally and nonverbally. And she raised a topic she acknowledged was going to be a tough sell, what she called, “debunking college myths.”

“Why am I talking about college to K-8 parents? Because I know you’re thinking about it,” Pope said. She paused and emphasized every word: “It doesn’t matter where they go to school.”

A recent study followed students who got into Ivy League schools and then chose not to attend for a range of reasons. What they found was that these students did just as well financially and in terms of perceived status as their Ivy League peers, even 15 years down the road. And, overall, they reported a higher level of personal happiness.

“The frenzy is causing the problem. You are causing the problem,” Pope told her audience.

“Have I debunked it?” she asked the audience with a rueful look. Silence stretched out for a second, followed by some scattered applause. “The jury’s still out.”

Professors and student services at Stanford combined to form a conference called S.O.S. - Stressed-Out Students. Schools and their stakeholders - parents, students, teachers and administrators - are invited to attend. The Stanford team presents strategies and tools to improve student health and community expectations. Participants draft a school-specific plan for change, focusing on a subject like the homework policy or school schedule. For more information, visit [sosconference.stanford.edu](http://sosconference.stanford.edu).