

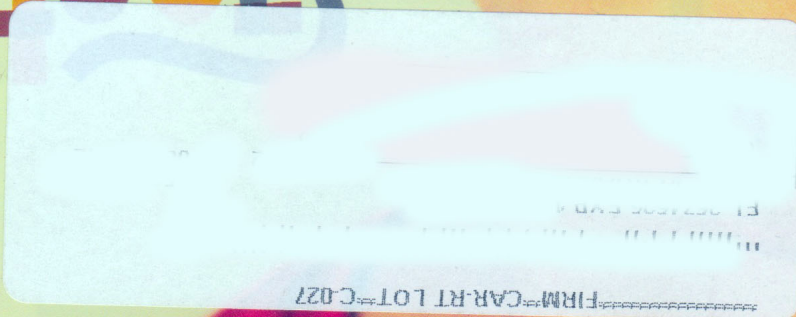
# EL

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## What TEENS NEED FROM Schools

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# What Teens Need from Schools



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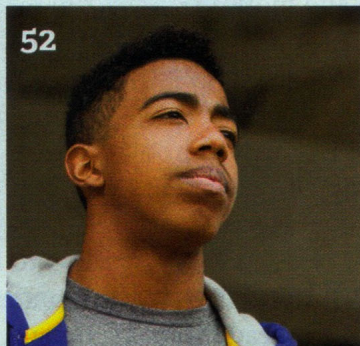
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# *The Teens Are Not Alright*

*Excessive workloads, crammed schedules, and “perfectionism” are causing teens undue stress.*

**Cathy Vatterott**

**O**ften when I am invited to middle and high schools to work with teachers, it is because school leaders believe their teachers’ homework practices are causing students too much stress. They complain that students are overwhelmed, overworked, and that many students are perfectionists, unhappy with anything but an A. These schools may be private or public, but typically serve an affluent community with Ivy League expectations. “Our school has a reputation as a pressure cooker,” the school leaders will say. They are not sure if the fault lies with the school, the students, or the parents. They just know something needs to be fixed.

Homework is a good place to start. It’s a visible and pervasive practice and an easy place to lay blame. But although excessive homework is often a problem, it is only a symptom of an education culture that wrongly equates rigor with workload and that values achievement at all costs. In many high-achieving schools, parents and teachers often believe everything they are doing is justified as a means to an end. There is almost a superstition that if anything

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is changed, it could all fall apart. But what's falling apart are the students.

The impressions of teachers and administrators in these schools are strikingly similar:

We've seen an uptick in students with anxiety. It just wasn't this bad a few years ago.

They are so driven. They *want* to be in all these activities and take all these AP classes, and then they get stressed out because they are overscheduled. They act like they've got it all together, then the smallest thing has them in tears or leads to a meltdown.

We have a lot of students who are perfectionists, especially girls. I give a simple homework assignment that shouldn't take longer than 30 minutes. They come back with something way beyond what they needed to do.

There's this hyper-competitiveness, that if you are not *the best*, you're nothing. If their paper isn't better than everyone else's, they feel like they failed. And heaven forbid they get a B on something. To them, it may as well be an F.

### What's Missing

What seems to be lost in the conversation is less obvious. Why are so many teens stressed out and disheartened at a time in their lives when they should be happy and carefree? However they got there, whether from the influence of parents, peers, society, or the school, the kids are not alright. I see a teen epidemic of what I call *rudderless box checkers*—four AP classes, check; debate team, check; two sports, check; honor roll, check. These students are joylessly going through the motions, not sure why, except they've been told this is what successful (but not necessarily *happy*) people have to do. This relentless

## What do teens need most in today's schools? Time to just be teens.

focus on achievement crowds out the important psychological needs of teens. For those teachers and administrators who are sensitive to it, they see a general malaise, an emptiness that exists in the hearts and souls of too many teens today.

For elementary students, many parents and teachers say, "Let kids be kids"—and they reel in the homework load and prioritize play, because that is what is *developmentally appropriate*. That message seems

### EL Online Exclusive

For a discussion of helping students synthesize and express their ideas, see the online article "Engaging Teen Writers Through Authentic Tasks" by Heather Wolpert-Gawron at [www.ascd.org/el0519wolpert](http://www.ascd.org/el0519wolpert).

to disappear when students reach middle or high school even though those students have developmental needs too. What about letting teens be teens? Teens after all are *becoming*. They are forming their identities, values, and views of the world. They need a balance of intellectual, emotional, and dare I say, spiritual experiences to help them grow into happy and well-adjusted adults, not just to prepare them to be college students. Teens need to:

- Experience learning as joyful and exciting.
- Read for pleasure.
- Play a game where winning doesn't matter.
- Figure out who they are and what they value.
- Fall in love, not with a person, but with a passion.
- Discover not what the world can do for them, but what they can do for the world.
- Reflect, wonder and dream, breathe, and live in the moment.

What do teens need most in today's schools? Time to just be teens.

### How Can Schools Help?

Reorienting a school's culture to be less intense is a long-term goal that requires a comprehensive plan.<sup>1</sup> But it is possible for educators, in the meantime, to bring more balance to students' lives. If what teens need most is free time, there are several school practices that could be changed to provide it. The same practices that steal time can give it back. Here are some places to consider starting.

#### Limit Homework

Students in high-achieving middle and high schools identify homework as the number one school stressor.



And it is particularly troubling that, when surveyed, only 20 to 30 percent of students found their homework “useful or meaningful” (Pope, Brown, & Miles, 2015). Research fails to show any benefit to piling it on beyond an hour in middle school or two hours in high school (all subjects combined). Schools that have reduced the homework load, even in advanced classes, have seen no detrimental effects on achievement. Many schools have mandated homework-free breaks or have banned weekend homework (Abeles, 2015). Another popular practice has been to push back the fall semester so final exams are before Christmas, allowing students to have a work-free holiday break (Vatterott, 2018).

In addition, schools should limit how much homework counts. The more homework counts in the grade, teachers observe, the more stressed students become and the more likely they are to cheat. Many schools are limiting homework’s impact to 20 percent, 10 percent, or even 5 percent of a grade. Schools that have implemented standards-based grading often no longer count homework in the grade. In these instances, teachers would still give feedback on homework, sometimes by a mark indicating level of mastery or with a temporary grade that carries zero weight (Vatterott, 2015). When homework is taken out of the grade, it takes the heat off stressed students. Contrary to the myth that “they just

won’t do it,” not grading homework empowers students to self-assess and to complete only those tasks they actually need to do to demonstrate mastery (Vatterott, 2018).

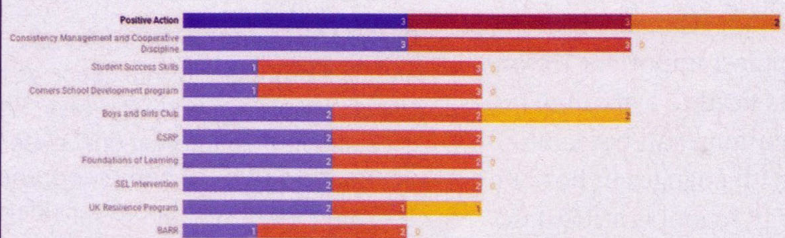
### *Coordinate the Workload Across Classes*

In a traditional high school schedule, students take courses from six to eight different teachers, each of whom may assign homework and schedule exams and projects without consulting each other. To avoid students being overloaded, a shared calendar can help teachers and coaches track due dates for major projects, exams, and events (Abeles, 2015). If needed, the administration can limit the number of assignments

## Did you know...

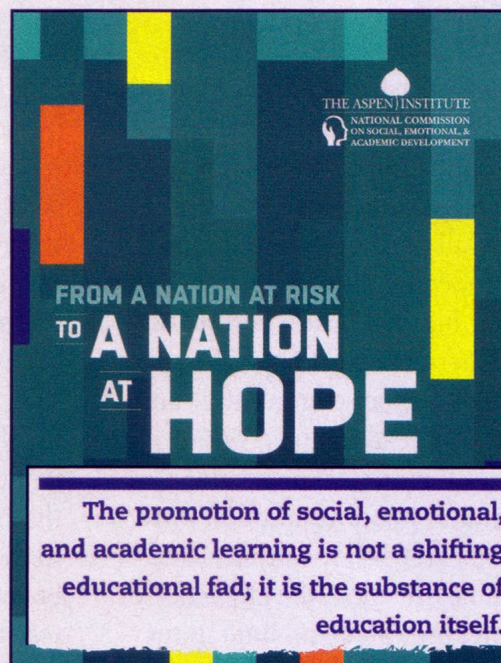
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www.theconversation.com, Roisin P. Corcoran, March 20, 2018

### The National Commission on Social, Emotional & Academic Development



http://nationathope.org/report-from-the-nation/, (p. 6), January 2019



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or exams given per day or week. Another strategy schools rely on is to designate specific days of the week for homework or tests in specific subjects (such as, all math tests are on Tuesdays, all science tests are on Thursdays, and all major English papers are due on Fridays).

### **Rethink the Schedule**

In many high schools, students juggle anywhere from six to eight courses each day. And then to add to the craziness, they have five minutes or less to travel from one class to another and to shift focus from one subject to another. Is that arrangement for the benefit of teachers, the students, or is it simply tradition? Even in college, a typical load per semester is four or five courses. So many saner options exist, from a modified block of four courses every other day, to a 4x4 semester where students take four courses each semester, to many hybrid models.

### **Provide Student and Parent Education**

For students, parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators to work together toward effective school change, all parties need to have a basic understanding of what teens need for optimal health and school engagement (Pope et al., 2015). The entire school community can benefit from examining a variety of topics that impact teens: the value and limitations of homework; brain research—how physical and mental health affect the efficiency of learning; the value and limitations of AP courses; and the concept of “best fit” colleges.

In San Mateo, California, Junipero Serra High School has a parent-education coordinator who organizes presentations on topics such as stress,

## **GUIDING QUESTIONS**

- Does your school feed into the culture of high-achieving, overwhelmed, “rudderless box checkers” that Vatterott describes? In what ways?
- What changes to existing school practices, like homework, could help lift the burden off your student population?

mental health, and the transition to college. Students and faculty attend the presentations during the school day, while parents attend in the evening. Menlo-Atherton High School in Atherton, California, has developed a parent-education series funded by the PTA, which has offered talks on sleep, drug and alcohol use, suicide, college admissions, and mental health (Pope et al., 2015).

These strategies are good first steps in reducing student stress and giving teens back the gift of time. They also send a powerful message that we value the well-being of our teens.

### **What Teens Need to Know**

We worry about preparing them for their future, but today’s teens need so much more than academic training. Some of the most important lessons that students need to learn aren’t in the curriculum at all but could be learned with changes in how we teach, the way school is structured, and the learning climate we create. What teens need from school are lessons that put school in *perspective* to life. Teens need to know that:

- School is not the real world and that in the real world, the rules will

differ from place to place.

- Their worth is not determined by their GPA or how many activities they are in.

- Focusing only on the future insults the value of the present.

- Failing a test or even a course does not make them a failure.

- Their success is not enhanced by someone else’s failure.

In pursuit of the almighty GPA, something is getting lost. Our teens are giving up a part of themselves. But we can help these youth rediscover a sense of joy and passion, if we can just give them what they most need in their overscheduled lives—time. **EL**

<sup>1</sup>For resources to reduce student stress and educate parents, visit [www.challengesuccess.org](http://www.challengesuccess.org).

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**Cathy Vatterott** ([vatterott@umsl.edu](mailto:vatterott@umsl.edu)) is a professor of education at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. She is considered an international expert on the topic of K–12 homework and is the author of four books including *Rethinking Homework: Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs*, 2nd Edition (ASCD, 2018) and *Rethinking Grading: Meaningful Assessment for Standards-Based Learning* (ASCD, 2015). Follow her on Twitter @realhomeworkldy.



*Involving teens in data-driven student-wellness improvement shows promise for one district.*

**Eric Hardie**

**A**troubling development in recent years has been a dramatic spike in mental health concerns among children and teenagers. The National Institute of Mental Health (2017) estimates that 3 million adolescents ages 12 to 17 have had at least one major depressive episode in the past year. The problem of students suffering from anxiety or depression, self-injurious behavior, and even suicide has become all too commonplace, and while schools try to help, their mental health resources are often strained.

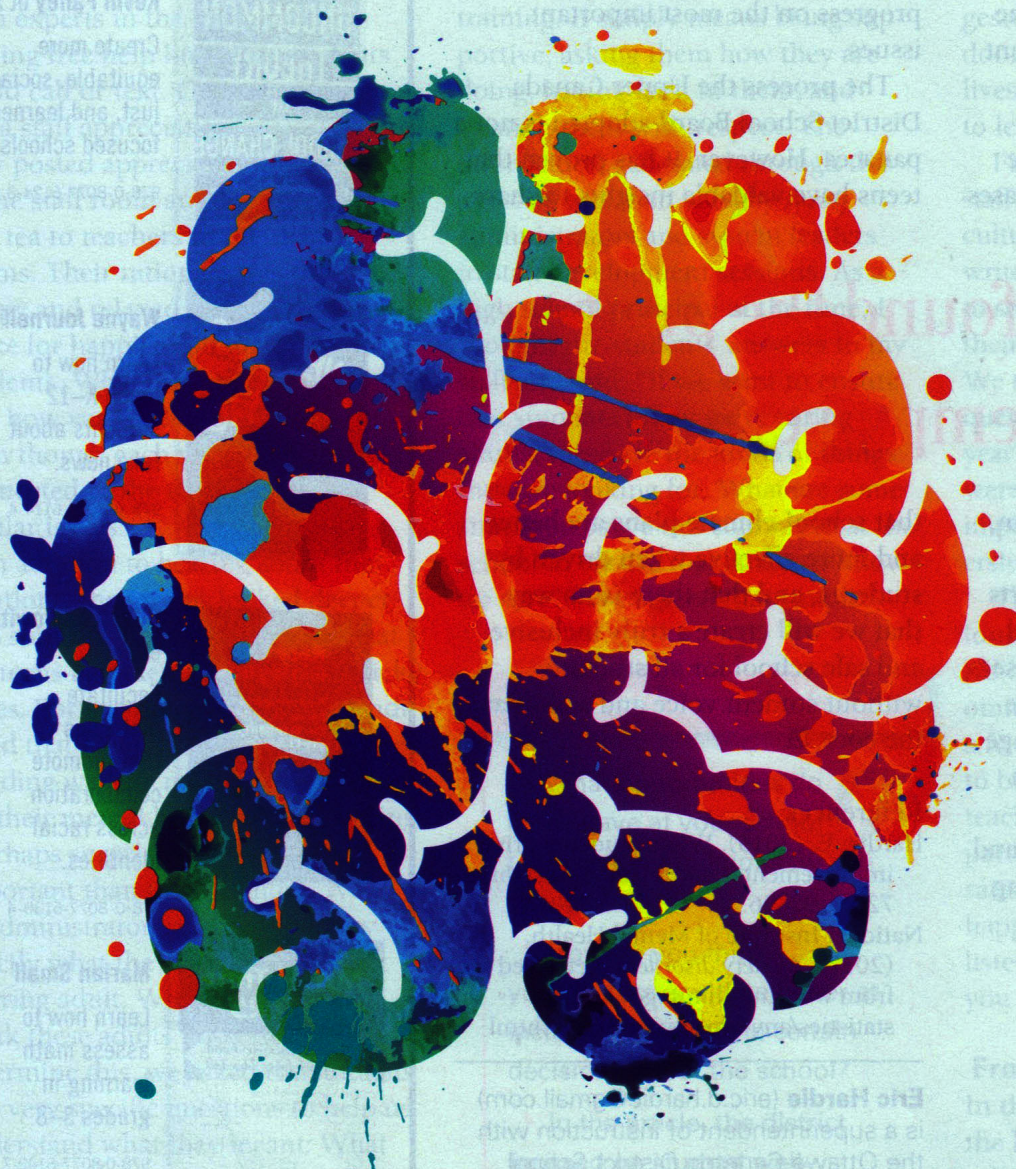
Compounding the problem is that the possible solutions to teens' mental health often come from the wrong place. Well-intentioned adults make their best guesses about what might help, but they often forget to directly include the students themselves in developing solutions. Adult perceptions are clouded by the way we *hope* students experience our schools, missing, at times, the hard truths of our teens' day-to-day experiences, both inside and outside of school.

# Giving Teens a Place at the Table





# Honoring the Teen Brain



Schools need to create environments that speak to—rather than resist or suppress—teenagers' neurological development.



# A Conversation with Thomas Armstrong

*Thomas Armstrong, a psychologist and educator, is the executive director of the American Institute for Learning and Human Development. He is the author of several influential books on strength-based education and working with students with special needs. His newest, *Mindfulness in the Classroom: Strategies for Promoting Concentration, Compassion, and Calm*, will be published this summer by ASCD. In *The Power of the Adolescent Brain* (ASCD, 2016), Armstrong sought to explore the science of the teenage brain and help educators figure out “what to do with all that energy and misdirection.” We recently talked to him about what today’s teens need most from schools. —Anthony Reboria*

**In *The Power of the Adolescent Brain* you say that, in terms of neurobiology, “adolescents’ experiences hold huge consequences for their adult lives.” What do you mean by that?**

The adolescent brain is what we call neuroplastic—it’s still in the process of being developed and, consequently, the kinds of things that happen in the teen’s environment can have a profound effect on the wiring, structure, and pruning of the brain. After adolescence, although the brain continues to develop connections and even add new neurons, it does so at a much less frantic level. We often talk about early childhood being crucial to development, and that’s true, of course. But adolescence is a critical developmental stage as well, and it’s kind of our last chance to make a lasting impact. So that really makes it essential that we give attention to what kind of classroom environments and school policies we have so that we can enhance brain development and work with the changes teenagers are experiencing.

**Yet you also say that schools are often brain-hostile or brain-ignorant in terms of teens’ development. What are they getting wrong?**

Well, the problem is that we tend to have this educational paradigm where we do the fun stuff in the early grades, and then we get serious starting in middle school and high school. Don’t get me wrong—rigorous academic and intellectual work is good and appropriate for adolescents. But what this focus often leaves out is the emotions—which of course teenagers are famous for, but which aren’t seen as something that’s central to their learning process. Indeed, this part of teens’ lives scares a lot of educators, and they may respond to it, for example, with more discipline and more homework. But this is just papering over the problems—and the opportunities as well—and it’s not allowing for real engagement.

Essentially, the curriculum in high school needs to be more *affective*. It needs to be more engaging in terms of humor, vitality, joy, and