

# **Life in the Upper School – What Students Are Saying**

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In the days since the faculty viewed the documentary film “Race to Nowhere”, Upper School students have been meeting in their advisor groups to discuss various issues that were raised in the film. I asked advisors to present five broad topics for discussion:

1. Homework – What kind, how much, too much?
2. Pressure and stress – How much is there? Where does it come from? How do you cope?
3. Over-scheduling – How busy are you? – (Including school and non-school obligations.)
4. Sleep – How much sleep do you get? Is it enough?
5. What might it be like if we focused more on process and less on product (grade)?

Following is a representative sampling of student responses to these five topics:

## **Homework**

- Some freshmen spend 2-3 hours per night on homework and sophomores spend 3-4 hours.
- Homework is usually helpful and relevant but sometimes there is too much.
- Some classes tend to pile on the homework.
- We really hate homework that doesn't teach us anything.
- Homework is usually manageable and important.
- Mathematics and languages assign the most homework.
- Homework that seems like only busywork is not helpful.
- “Good homework” has a high benefit-to-time payoff.
- Homework is only valuable if feedback is provided.
- No homework should be given the night before and after a major test/paper.

## **Pressure and Stress**

- Lots of stress – from parents, from self, from being graded, from being a college-prep school.
- Deadlines and multiple activities stress me out.
- Parents are often the primary source of stress as far as grades are concerned.
- High anxiety ebbs and flows during the school year; certain times are much more stressful than others.
- Much of the pressure students feel to ‘be the best’ they put upon themselves.
- Workload, pressure and stress are cyclical.
- On a scale of 1-10, we believe the stress level in the Upper School is about 7-8.
- Most agreed that sports/arts are a stress reliever.
- Additional stress is created by teachers who tend to schedule all the papers and tests in the same week.

- College applications and acceptance loom large for seniors.
- Some of the “homework stress” is a result of procrastination.

### **Over-scheduling**

- Generally, we are not too busy - violin practice for one, a job for another.
- Lack of awareness that some “small groups” are heavily scheduled at certain times during the year – field hockey travels a great deal, choir is obligated to perform in various venues, volleyball tournaments last an entire weekend, cheerleaders practice on Saturdays, rehearsals for plays and musicals take a great deal of time.
- Older students say that it takes some time to learn how to be efficient in meeting obligations.
- Most students who felt over-scheduled were taking on extra activities because they wanted to do so.
- Coping requires finding a balance between homework, out-of-school activities and time for relaxation.

### **Sleep**

- Many students try to survive on 5-6 hours of sleep each night.
- I try to make up for lack of sleep during the week by sleeping 10-12 hours per night on the weekend.
- All the students in my advisor group average 8-9 hours of sleep per night.
- Five of the seven students in my group average only 6 hours of sleep per night.
- Most students reported that they thought 5-6 hours of sleep per night was enough.
- My students reported that 6-8 of sleep per night was the average.

### **Process vs. Product (Grade)**

- My students are torn about grades – some feel motivated by grades, other like the idea of comprehensive teacher feedback without grades.
- Focusing on process would be less stressful but we worry that some students would not work as hard.
- Both process and product are necessary but either extreme is impractical.
- The purpose of the question is more important than the answer to the question.
- My students want more assessment of process instead of product but are not sure how this could work.

Our discussions will continue within the advisor groups in the coming weeks. Discussions continue to take place as well, both formally and informally, among the Upper School faculty. It is my hope that these issues will spur some meaningful dinner table conversations in your home about life in the Upper School and how we might make adjustments to our program to enrich the experience for everyone.

