

Addressing Stressed Out Students

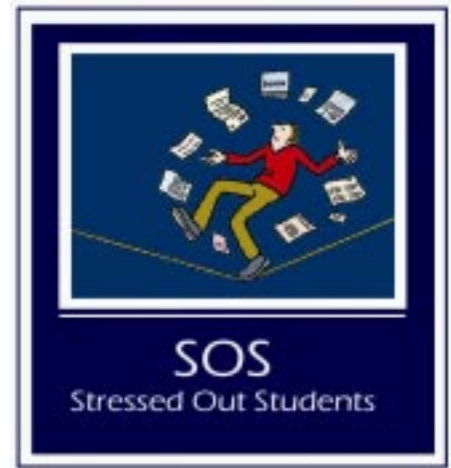
Conferences and Research to Alleviate Academic Stress

“In the past ten years we have seen an alarming increase in academic stress in students of all ages. The SOS-Stressed Out Students project examines the sources of this stress and works with students, parents, teachers and school communities to devise site-specific strategies to foster student health, integrity, and school engagement.”

-- Denise Clark Pope, Stanford University School of Education Lecturer and Stressed Out Students Founder

Recent scholarship has found that adolescents are often compromising their mental and physical health, personal values, and commitment to learning as they try to cope with growing pressure to achieve in schools. In a survey released last year, 460 parents in California’s Santa Clara and San Mateo counties cited school-related stress among their top concerns for their children.

The Stanford University School of Education (SUSE) is addressing this problem through research and conferences with Bay Area middle and high schools. SUSE lecturer Denise Clark Pope, author of *Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students* (2001), is spearheading these efforts.



According to Pope, while much research on school achievement, motivation, and stress has been conducted, few studies examine the students’ perspectives on these issues, and even fewer address the school communities’ experiences as they attempt to enact change on issues of academic stress. SUSE researchers are particularly interested in these issues, especially school reform efforts, where students work closely with parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators to foster change. The researchers also hope to create some specific tools that schools can use to address the problem of academic stress and increase student engagement in school.

SOS Conference

Last May, SUSE, along with the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children’s Health, hosted a conference entitled “SOS-Stressed Out Students: Helping to Improve Health, School Engagement, and Academic Integrity.” Fifteen Bay Area middle and high school teams, including students, teachers, principals, counselors, and parents participated in panels and workshops designed to gather perspectives on academic stress and to empower teams to create change in their schools.

At a panel open to the public, students described their experiences of cheating to get good grades in order to please their parents and get into highly ranked colleges. Some felt the pressure to succeed was so great that it caused them to behave unethically. Dean Deborah Stipek told an audience of 300 that everyone is part of the problem. “We’re all overwhelmed by a culture and set of norms that seem totally out of control,” she said. “School for many kids is not a place to learn but a place to perform. We need to begin to change the culture so our youth can take joy in learning.”



Stressed Out Student Coaches include (L to R) Sarah Miles (SUSE PhD Candidate), Mollie Galloway (PhD '03), SUSE Lecturer Denise Clark Pope (PhD '99), and Katharine Strunk (SUSE PhD candidate). SOS coaches are working with Bay Area school teams to develop action plans to address the causes of academic stress.

To address each school's problems directly, school teams were paired in workshops with a SUSE PhD student or recent graduate who served as a coach, helping them to develop action plans to start changing their school's culture. Some schools' goals include developing student and parent surveys, revising homework and testing policies, investigating alternative school schedules, and planning faculty and parent workshops. Teams have continued to meet since the conference and will reconvene with other schools in November to assess their progress and discuss future plans.

"I'm amazed by the overwhelmingly positive results of the conference; we're seeing schools re-examine homework policies and look at making changes in curriculum and assessment. I'm pleasantly surprised by the

energy at the schools and the willingness to change," said Pope.

Findings from the conference and post-conference study will be published in a chapter in the book *International Handbook of Student Experience in Elementary and Secondary Schools*, and presentation proposals have been submitted for the upcoming AERA conference.

For more information, please visit: <http://sosconference.stanford.edu>