

Dear Students (and Parents):

As a Counseling team, we want to encourage you (students, with the support of your parents) to consider designing each year of your high school life to be joyful and interesting. Take courses that pique your curiosity and fuel your creative energy; don't take classes because you think you have to. Participate in extracurricular activities that make you smile and fill you with joy.

Counselors strive to support students to make effective decisions about how to schedule your time, which we hope will be joyful, balanced and interesting. The teen years incorporate many competing demands:

- Challenging academics
- Clubs (Mock Trial, Speech and Debate, Robotics, etc.)
- Athletic pursuits (school teams, club teams, etc.)
- Performing arts (drama, music, dance performances)
- Family Life
- Sleep
- Social Life
- Paid work
- Community Service Hours

We often find ourselves listening to students tell us how many things you intend to do in terms of what you think you "can handle without falling apart." This often includes several AP courses, two or more sports per year, community service, part time jobs, and College of Marin courses. **We'd like students to think, not about how much you can take on, but what ingredients will make for a balanced and joyful life experience.**

Being 15, 16 or 17 years old is a task in and of itself. There are many development milestones and rites of passage that have nothing to do with school that take time and energy:

- Learning to drive
- Falling in (and out) of love
- Evaluating friendships
- Exploring values
- Arguing for fairness in life

Much of the current research about teen emotional health centers on the exponential increase in anxiety, depression and an overwhelming fear of failure. According to Denise Pope, Maureen Brown and Sarah Miles (co-authors of *Overloaded and Underprepared, Strategies for Stronger Schools and Healthy, Successful Kids*),

"our current fast-paced, high-pressure culture works against much of what we know about healthy child development. The overemphasis on grades, test scores, and rote answers has stressed out some kids and marginalized many more. Our largely singular focus on academic achievement has resulted in a lack of attention to other components of a successful life - the ability to be independent, adaptable, ethical, and engaged critical thinkers."

In their book, Pope, Brown & Miles *outline several strategies to alleviate the harried nature of student lives, and support a healthier and saner adolescence.* Some of these include:

- Fewer AP classes (the authors found no conclusive data to suggest that AP classes make students more likely to succeed in college, and some colleges felt that taking an

AP exam and passing it was not so great an advantage that students didn't benefit by repeating the course in college)

- Later start time
- Lower stakes testing
- No homework over extended breaks
- More sleep

Our combined experience has given us pause to consider what we see as an unhealthy increase in expectations. Many of you tell us:

- *You feel you are in a constant state of competition for the scarce resource of college admission from the time you enter 9th grade until you walk across the stage senior year.*
- *You are barraged by questions from peers, parents and adults in the community to share their college lists, GPA's, SAT/ACT scores, and future plans.*

According to Madeline Levine (The Price of Privilege and Teach Your Children Well),

"Fewer and fewer affluent teens are able to resist the constant pressure to excel. Between accelerated courses, multiple extracurricular activities, premature preparation for college, coaches and tutors engaged to wring the last bit of performance out of them, many kids find themselves scheduled to within an inch of their lives. Being pushed toward ever increasing levels of achievement leaves little time for internal exploration which is critical for the process of self-development. It cannot be rushed."

The teen years have come to look more like a business endeavor than an endeavor of the heart.

The focus on what children can do has overtaken the focus on who you children are.

Although you may appear to be doing all the right things (earning high grades, engaging in athletics and leadership activities), Levine's research and our own Healthy Kids Survey illustrate that you are at staggering risk of becoming addicted to alcohol or drugs, or becoming severely anxious and depressed.

*When considering AP courses, know that these take a huge commitment of time and energy. **For many students, the perfect number of AP courses to take is zero. For others, one AP course in an area of strong interest or aptitude is just right. For those who want intense challenge, a maximum of two college courses in any given year will provide for a demanding and rigorous experience,** while leaving room for athletic or performing art pursuits. Limiting the number of AP courses to no more than two will also leave time for relaxation, socializing, spending time with family, and getting enough sleep to feel energized every day you attend school.*

With so many competing alternatives for your time and energy, we hope you will prioritize joy along with challenge, and throw in a little relaxation for good measure.

*"I think there should be a good balance between
being a good student
and being able to enjoy your high school life."*