

Parents offered tutorial on raising balanced students

By Kris DiLorenzo

Ardley High School recognizes that academic success shouldn't come at the expense of students' wellbeing. To examine the effects of student-reported stress and to alleviate it, the school, in partnership with Stanford University, has launched "Challenge Success," a multi-year program.

On Dec. 3, at 7 p.m. in the AHS auditorium, parents will have the opportunity to attend a presentation on "The Well-Balanced Student," delivered by Jon Kleiman, school program director for the Challenge Success organization's Northeast region.

The program kicked off this past May with an online survey, asking students in grades 9 through 12 about their sleep habits, anxiety, stress symptoms, homework hours, and other factors affecting their physical and emotional wellbeing. Stanford compiled and analyzed the resulting data, and provided an executive summary to the project's team leaders: Ardsley Assistant Schools Superintendent Layne Hudes and AHS Principal Rudy Arietta.

Team members include AHS Assistant Principal Jonathan Hirsch, math teacher Alyson Tina, English teacher Jessica Bapteste, ninth-grade guidance counselor Tara Wright, social worker Monique Johnson, parent representative Ferna Sherman, and seniors Jason Krumper and Fiona Hughes.

"Working with Challenge Success, we have gathered data from our high school students that has helped us to better understand their needs and the factors affecting them," Schools Superintendent Ryan Schoenfeld told the Enterprise. "We are turning this data into actionable

strategies that will help create a more balanced and academically fulfilling life for our students."

That goal dovetails with the district's overall emphasis on social and emotional learning (SEL), which helps students manage emotions, set goals, feel empathy, be optimistic and self-aware, and combine academic skills with SEL skills.

"'Difficult' or 'stressful' were the most common words used to describe school," Arietta reported. "Half the students are just 'doing' school: doing the workload, but not seeing the value in it. That's indicative of the stress they're under. They're trying to go through all the things they're scheduled to do, but they're not appreciating the journey. They're just trying to get through school."

Arietta expressed pride in the survey's finding that 71 percent of students felt they have an adult at the school to talk to if they have a problem, and feel supported.

Other statistics, though, were troubling. Adolescents are thought to need about nine hours of sleep a night, but the students reported getting six and a half hours. Consequently, sleep deprivation and difficulty sleeping were among the stress symptoms — exhaustion, headaches, sweating, stomach problems, difficulty breathing, weight gain, weight loss — that 86.5 percent of students reported experiencing at least once in the month prior to the survey.

When questioned about cheating, 92.5 percent of students admitted to doing so in at least one way in the past year. However, the survey defined cheating in a broad

Challenge

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sense. "The survey gave examples," Arietta explained. "That includes not just plagiarizing, or copying a neighbor's test, but also sharing information about a test, for example if you took the test in the morning and told someone taking it that afternoon what was on the test, or working on a project together when a teacher says to work on it individually."

Arietta noted that the cheating statistic didn't surprise Krumper and Hughes. According to them, that type of student behavior is common.

The AHS faculty is reviewing the survey data to identify areas the school would like to address, possibly by changing policies or practices, after the ideas have been discussed among district administrators, the board of education, teachers, and parents.

"We're in the sharing information phase," Arietta stated. "After that, we'll figure out what we are going to do."

In his presentation, Kleiman will talk about the issues brought up by the survey — issues shared by other schools participating in Challenge Success, such as Bronxville and Scarsdale high schools. Schoenfeld's predecessor, Lauren Allen, had established through her networking with other districts that Ardsley students are not alone in experiencing problems with stress.

Kleiman will also present suggestions to engage parents and provide them with resources to foster effective interactions with their children. "This can't be just school-based," Arietta remarked.

He is quick to point out that Challenge Success is a solutions-based conversation, and doesn't blame teachers, children, or parents, but rather, offers information and perspective on how to support students to be not only successful but also healthy.

The school will be setting up focus groups or formal conversations with students to seek their input and delve further into the stories behind the survey data.

According to Arietta, Challenge Success will administer a survey to middle school students during this academic year.