Kids who go to elite private high schools enjoy lots of advantages. They have access to the most challenging academic classes at reputable institutions, with staffs that are well-equipped to help them prepare for college. Parents pay an
average of $10,000 per year to ensure their kids this privilege.

And yet the rigor that these opportunities demand can come with an extra cost for the students themselves. A recent study surveyed and interviewed students at a handful of these high schools and found that about half of them are chronically stressed. The results aren’t surprising—between the homework required for Advanced Placement classes, sports practices, extracurricular activities like music and student government, and SAT prep, the fortunate kids who have access to these opportunities don’t have much downtime these days. These experiences can cause kids to burn out by the time they get to college, or to feel the psychological and physical effects of stress for much of their adult lives, says Marya Gwadz, a senior research scientist at the New York University College of Nursing.

The problem is that at least some of that academic pressure is warranted. It’s more competitive than ever to get into college, so it’s incumbent on students with the wherewithal to apply to the most competitive schools to present the strongest possible portfolio, and their parents and teachers push them to do so. These kids find different tactics for coping, sometimes in ways that aren’t healthy. So how can administrators and parents start to change the culture of stress while still pushing kids to reach their full potential?

At its most basic, stress is defined as any change or pressure in the environment. Most people think of stress as a bad thing, but in reality most people need some of it. “A little stress and in moderation can be helpful to high schoolers in so many ways. It motivates them to study, to do better. It helps push them,” says Mary Alvord, a psychologist specializing in teens based in Maryland. Adolescence is an important time to learn to deal with stress because teens can then deal with it better in college and in their adult lives.
“A little stress and in moderation can be helpful to high schoolers in so many ways. It motivates them to study, to do better.”

But too much stress has many effects on the body and mind, Alvord says. In the short term it can cause anxiety; over long periods of time, elevated levels of stress hormones can degrade the immune system, cause heart problems, exacerbate respiratory and gastrointestinal issues, and bring on chronic anxiety and depression. That’s bad for anyone, but it can be especially bad for high schoolers: “Colleges are complaining that kids are disengaged, they’re dropping out, taking a long time to graduate. It’s not developmentally appropriate for them to work so hard,” says Gwadz, one of the authors of the recent study. And since everyone has a different psychological capacity for stress, it’s hard to know when a student is pushed to the point of degrading his or her health.

The study, published recently in the journal, Frontiers in Psychology, focused on students in two elite East Coast high schools, a population that has received surprisingly little research attention. The researchers surveyed and interviewed 128 students, teachers, and administrators about students’ stress levels and coping strategies. They found that 49 percent of students reported feeling “a great deal of stress” on a daily basis. Half reported doing three or more hours of homework per night, and 26 percent noted that they had been diagnosed with depression—over four times the national average of 6 percent.
Roughly half of students reported feeling “a great deal of stress” on a daily basis.

Pinpointing where this stress is coming from is no easy task. “Students described that schoolwork, grades, and college admissions constituted their greatest sources of stress,” the study reads. But many students are only stressed about these things because they internalize pressures from parents, teachers, and peers. School culture undoubtedly plays a large role. “Indeed, chronic stress has been cited as the new ‘cultural currency’ in highly competitive private schools, where students often equate their schools’ level of rigor with the amount of stress experienced by its students,” the study authors write.

Importantly, chronic stress doesn’t just happen to privileged, wealthy kids—in fact, its effects are likely most pronounced on the upper and lower extremes of the socioeconomic ladder, says Bo Paulle, a sociology professor at the University of Amsterdam and author of Toxic Schools, which details Paulle’s years of field work in the South Bronx. But comparing stress levels at wealthy and high-poverty schools may prove to be an apples-to-oranges analysis because the causes are so different. “Schools are stressful at the bottom because of physical safety,” Paulle says, citing examples of dangerous scenarios to which some of the highest-poverty schools are prone: stabbings, gang activity, fights for perceived slights. And as a result the stress that these students experience is likely more intense—exponentially greater, Paulle estimates—and more woven into the fabric of their everyday lives than the stresses students experience at elite high schools. It’s hard to isolate the stressors at low-income schools from those outside of school,
such as family issues or unstable living conditions. But even those parents who make their children’s education a top priority are often still powerless to prevent the stress that comes with the school environment. “Those parents don’t have economic or social resources to keep their kids out of these stressful schools,” Paulle says.

“Schools are stressful at the bottom because of physical safety.” The stress that these students experience—exponentially greater.

The stress that students experience at these schools may be more all-consuming than at the elite schools, but the way cope with it is surprisingly universal. “We learn a lot by modeling,” Alvord says—teens mimic de-stressing techniques of those they see around them and figure out what works. Hopefully, she adds, they’re lucky enough to see some healthy coping strategies, like exercise, meditation, listening to or playing music, planning busy days or weeks in advance, or talking about the issue with family or friends.

But if they’re less fortunate, or the chronic stress is too intense, they seek less healthy methods of coping with the pressure. Students in low-income communities struggle to find models of good stress-relief tactics around them, Paulle says. Many find themselves unequipped to talk about earlier traumas that may be affecting their behavior as teenagers; instead, even if they know better, they find themselves lashing out or totally shutting down. “We’re giving them
nothing to actually cope with this, no constant relationships, and maybe one
guidance counselor,” Paulle says. “And when I was in the Bronx, no one was
talking about how your body constantly being on alert [the result of chronic
stress] is going to alter your behavior.”

Another common way in which teens avoid the issue, no matter their income
level, is in drugs or alcohol. In the study of the elite high schools, 38 percent of
the students surveyed claimed that they had been drunk in the last month,
though few noted that they had gotten in trouble for doing so. Past research
shows that the numbers are pretty much the same for students in low-income
schools. Starting substance use when a student is just maturing to adulthood can
be particularly damaging, Gwadz says—it’s a quick fix to forget about the real
problem at hand instead of dealing with it, and can also lead to addiction in the
long term.

How do parents and teachers create the right kind of school environment
—preparing for college, but aren’t killing themselves in the process?

Though past studies have focused more on the psychology of stress, in the
future, researchers studying student stress will likely incorporate information
about biological aspects, measuring students’ stress-hormone levels to
determine the most stressful factors, and even compare the physiology of
stressed and non-stressed students in the same environment. But in the
meantime, how do parents and teachers start to create the right kind of school environment for students, one in which the kids are preparing as best they can for college—and with the right amount of stress—but aren’t killing themselves in the process?

“That’s the million dollar question,” Gwadz says. Parents are often the first group to be blamed for their kids’ stress, since many equate their children’s success with their own, or push their kids to go to an Ivy League college because the parents assume that will help them lead happier lives. But Gwadz thinks that blaming parents is a mistake—the issue is often bigger than just a family dynamic, and it’s hard to know what’s best for your kids.

Parents can still help their children cope, however. Alvord suggests that parents help their kids find balance, even in their most stressful periods, by encouraging them enjoy free moments and helping them find coping strategies that work for them. Sometimes, parents who address their children’s stress head-on find themselves rejiggering their family values, Gwadz says. Parents ask themselves: What is really the most important thing for my kid?

“‘You can’t be ‘on’ 24/7. How can you allocate some time to an activity that can help relieve stress?’”

Ideally, the school culture would shift as well, though Paulle is not very optimistic about it. “School cultures reflect the greater competitive environment of global capitalism,” Paulle says. “Our current system is a warped manifestation
of our general anxiety about downward social mobility and what it takes to move up.” But Paulle is more hopeful that equipping kids to learn better coping strategies will help them to thrive within a dysfunctional system.

Schools can help students achieve that by teaching them coping strategies as part of the curriculum, at both ends of the socioeconomic ladder. There are programs that do this, such as the Guiding Rage Into Power (GRIP) program piloted at San Quentin state prison in California. Programs like GRIP haven’t been tested in schools, nor modified to be culturally and developmentally appropriate for students, but researchers are starting figure out what kinds of adjustments would be necessary to do so. “The best thing we can do is really giving these kids the types of programs to teach them to cope, and integrating them front and center into the curricula along with insights from neurobiology,” Paulle says.

In some ways the most elegant solution is the one that is the most difficult to execute: letting students themselves learn to strike an equilibrium between stress and relaxation, especially when stress seems to be the more powerful force. “It comes down to balance,” Alvord says. “You can’t be ‘on’ 24/7. How can you allocate some time to an activity that can help relieve stress?” Sometimes those activities can look good on a college application, too—a student who plays recreational (not hyper-competitive) soccer for many years is moving to relieve stress and also shows college that she can persevere; clearing hiking trails can be relaxing and constitute community service hours that many kids need to graduate. Teens especially need to make time to sleep. “If you don’t sleep enough, your mood and performance are affected,” Alvord says—an easy fact to forget when students are staying up until 1 a.m. doing homework and getting up at 6 a.m. to go to school.

The authors of the Frontiers study didn’t write about any concrete solutions,
either for the wealthy high-school students they studied or those in low-income communities. They hope to address them in future research; “The next step for us would be to develop more actionable strategies and policies, relying on experts, and helping schools interpret the data that we collect,” Gwadz says. “Everyone wants to know what the solution is.”

Paulle assumes that whatever solutions the researchers find will be implemented slowly. “Everyone’s got a role to play. We have to collectively reorient ourselves [towards addressing student stress] and slowly but surely use the insights into what actually works and determine how might it be best translated across different groups of students.”

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