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Less Homework, More Yoga, From a Principal Who Hates Stress

By [SARA RIMER](#)

NEEDHAM, Mass. — It was 6:30 p.m. The lights were still on at Needham High School, here in the affluent Boston suburbs. Paul Richards, the principal, was meeting with the Stress Reduction Committee.

On the agenda: finding the right time to bring in experts to train students in relaxation techniques.

Don't try to have them teach relaxation in study hall, said Olivia Boyd, a senior. Students, she explained, won't want to interrupt their work. They were already too busy before or after school for the training.

No one is busier than Josh Goldman. Captain of varsity tennis, president of the Spanish club and a member of the student council and the Stress Reduction Committee, Josh was not able to squeeze in the meeting at all.

Mr. Richards noted his absence wryly. "Josh is a perfect example," he said. "He's got a hundred things going on."

Here is the high-powered culture that Mr. Richards is trying to change, even if only a little.

But cultural change does not come smoothly. When Mr. Richards stopped publishing the honor roll in the local newspaper last winter, a move aimed at some parents who had turned the lists into a public accounting, [Rush Limbaugh](#) accused him of politically correct coddling of students, and [Jay Leno](#) mocked the school on national television. He received hate mail from all over the country.

Mr. Richards is undeterred. "It's not that I'm trying to turn the culture upside down," he said.

"It's very important to protect the part of the culture that leads to all the achievement," he said. "It's more about bringing the culture to a healthier place."

His new stress committee is starting to come up with recommendations, like the relaxation

consultants, and is surveying students about unhealthy stress. This term, Mr. Richards is talking up the yoga classes that are required of all seniors. He has asked teachers to schedule homework-free weekends and holidays.

“The irony,” he said, referring to the homework breaks, “is that students tell us they appreciate the time because it allows them to catch up on other schoolwork.”

Mr. Richards is just one principal in the vanguard of a movement to push back against an ethos of super-achievement at affluent suburban high schools amid the extreme competition over college admissions. He has joined like-minded administrators from 44 other high schools and middle schools — most in the San Francisco Bay Area but others scattered from Texas to New York — to form a group known as S.O.S., for Stressed Out Students.

The group was formed four years ago by Denise Pope, a lecturer at the [Stanford University](#) School of Education and author of the book, “Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic and Miseducated Students” (Yale University Press, 2001).

High schools in other Boston suburbs — Wellesley, Lexington, Wayland — have taken steps similar to Needham’s, organizing stress committees and yoga classes. Some high schools are requiring students to get parental permission before enrolling in Advanced Placement classes. Others are experimenting with later start times so students can get more sleep.

Dr. Pope advises schools to end the tradition of student newspapers publishing end-of-the-year lists of seniors and their colleges. “We found that there are kids who are lying,” she said, “because they’re embarrassed to say they’re going to a state school.”

At Needham, there is some grumbling that measures like homework-free holidays could erode academic rigor.

“You run out of time,” said Max Hekler, an English teacher. “You can’t teach ‘The Odyssey.’ Something has to go.”

Needham began an intense self-examination a couple years ago, after four of its young people — one in college, two in high school and one in middle school — committed suicide. While school officials emphasized that the suicides were not related to stress, the deaths heightened concerns about how Needham’s students were responding to school pressure.

Even before the suicides, Needham school officials had responded to youth surveys indicating troubling rates of alcohol and drug use and depression — rates like those at other affluent high schools — by establishing an initiative, starting in elementary school, to help students develop better emotional and social skills.

“One of our big goals is to try to help students become more resilient,” Mr. Richards said. He wants to help students learn to cope better with the inevitable setbacks, he said, “so they don’t fall apart if they get a B-minus.”

Mr. Richards, 36, arrived here three years ago from Nantucket, where, as principal of the island’s high school, he had to push students to aim higher. For all the academic advantages of Needham High School, what struck him, he said, was the cost to all this achieving and performing.

Many students were so stressed out about grades and test scores — and so busy building résumés to get into the small number of brand-name colleges they equated with success — that, he said, they could not fully engage with school.

“A lot of these kids,” he said, “are being held hostage to the culture.”

Mr. Richards, who is pursuing his doctorate at [Boston College](#), made himself an expert in research on stress. In his office one recent morning, he grabbed a marker and drew a curve on a flip chart to illustrate scientific findings that while a certain amount of stress is necessary for learning and growth, too much interferes.

He said he was concerned with widespread cheating, mostly by students copying homework and failing to cite sources fully. Cheating, experts say, is a problem at high schools nationwide.

At assemblies he encourages students to choose classes that are challenging but manageable, rather than trying to rack up A.P.’s. He talks to students and parents about aiming for colleges that are the right fit, whether [Harvard](#) or the [University of Massachusetts](#) at Amherst. Mr. Richards earned his master’s in education at Harvard, and his undergraduate degree at UMass.

Mr. Richards acknowledges that his efforts are a work in progress. Still, some are skeptical.

“The stress reduction — I’m still waiting,” said Harris Feldman, a senior, as his classmates gathered for yoga.

Harris had arrived from English class, where his teacher, David Smokler, had started a unit on writing the college essay by reassuring his students that the name of the school did not matter. “When you graduate from college, no one is going to care where you went,” Mr. Smokler said. “If they do care, you don’t want to work for that boss.”

“The culture here has always been about rigor,” Mr. Smokler said after class, adding that Mr. Richards wanted “to make sure that it’s not just about rigor for rigor’s sake, but that it’s meaningful throughout the school.”

Dr. Connie Barr, who was president of the school’s parent-teacher association until last June,

when her youngest child graduated, and is now an elected member of the town's School Committee, praises Mr. Richards's efforts.

"It's not that your child isn't going to have stress," said Dr. Barr, an internist. "What is the job of high school? The job is to learn. The job is to prepare for the beginning of life. To be constantly stressed is to make it more difficult to learn." While parents are generally supportive of Mr. Richards's efforts, Dr. Barr said, opposition would be swift if achievement began to fall.

"If the results aren't there," Mr. Richards said, referring to Needham's record of academic success, "they'd run me out of town pretty quickly."

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