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It Takes a Suburb: A Town Struggles to Ease Student Stress

By KYLE SPENCER APRIL 5, 2017

Small rocks from the beaches of eastern Massachusetts began appearing at Lexington High School last fall. They were painted in pastels and inscribed with pithy advice: *Be happy.... Mistakes are O.K.... Don't worry, it will be over soon.* They had appeared almost by magic, boosting spirits and spreading calm at a public high school known for its sleep-deprived student body.

Crying jags over test scores are common here. Students say getting B's can be deeply dispiriting, dashing college dreams and profoundly disappointing parents.

The rocks, it turns out, were the work of a small group of students worried about rising anxiety and depression among their peers. They had transformed a storage area into a relaxation center with comfy chairs, an orange/peach lava lamp and a coffee table brimming with donated art supplies and lots and lots of rocks — to be painted and given to favorite teachers and friends. They called it the Rock Room.

“At first it was just us,” said Gili Grunfeld, a senior who helped with the effort. “Then everyone was coming in.”

So many rocks were piling up, they had to be stored in a display case near one of the cafeterias. The maxims seemed to call out to students as they headed to their

classes in conceptual physics, computer programming, astronomy and Advanced Placement Music Theory.

And they became a visual reminder of a larger, communitywide initiative: to tackle the joy-killing, suicide-inducing performance anxiety so prevalent in turbocharged suburbs like Lexington. In recent years, the problem has spiked to tragic proportions in Colorado Springs, Palo Alto, Calif., and nearby Newton, Mass., where stress has been blamed for the loss of multiple young lives. In January, a senior at Lexington High School, who had just transferred from a local private school, took her own life.

Residents in this tight-knit hamlet, with its high level of civic engagement, are hoping to stem the tide. Mary Czajkowski, the district superintendent, was hired in 2015 with the mandate of “tackling the issue head on.”

Elementary school students now learn breathing exercises and study how the brain works and how tension affects it. New rules in the high school limit homework. To decrease competition, there are no class rankings and no valedictorians and salutatorians. In town, there are regular workshops on teen anxiety and college forums designed to convince parents that their children can succeed without the Ivy Leagues. Last October, more than 300 people crammed into the town hall for a screening of “Beyond Measure,” a sequel to Vicki Abeles’s documentary on youth angst, “Race to Nowhere.”

“We want to be a model,” said Jessie Steigerwald, a longtime school board member.

But it has not been easy.

Claire Sheth, a mother of four who had invited Ms. Abeles to town, describes Lexington students as “tired to the core.” Students say depression is so prevalent that it affects friendships, turning teenagers into crisis counselors. “A lot of kids are trying to manage adult anxiety,” said the principal, Laura Lasa.

The problem is not anecdotal. In a 2015 national health survey, 95 percent of Lexington High School students reported being heavily stressed over their classes and 15 percent said they had considered killing themselves in the last year.

Thinking about it most often were Asian and Asian-American students — 17 percent of them, as is the case nationally.

The town's growing Asian community has not been timid acknowledging the problem. Through college forums and chat rooms, a group of parents and leaders of the local Chinese-American and Indian-American associations have been working to lower the competitive bar and realign parental thinking. Others are pushing back. They don't want the workload reduced — they moved here for the high-rigor schools. At association meetings, where the tension is most pronounced, discussions about academic competition in the district have brought some to tears.

Indeed, reversing the culture is complicated in a town that prides itself on sending dozens of students to the Ivy Leagues: 10 went to Harvard last year and seven to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Young people are lauded at school board meetings and online for having published academic papers or performed at Lincoln Center. Last year, the varsity team placed second in the 2016 History Bowl nationals and fourth in the National Science Bowl. The robotics team has qualified for the FIRST Championship, an international technology and engineering competition, for five of the last six years.

After school recently at the public library, which was packed with students poring over textbooks, calculus work sheets, lab reports and term papers, a sophomore looked up from her world history textbook and said, “You see all these people? They want the same thing — that's really overwhelming.” What they want: Entry into a top colleges when acceptance rates are at an all-time low.

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Lexington looks and feels like a lot of other affluent suburbs: serene, stately, with a whiff of muted money. Minivans and aging Volvos are packed with violins and well-worn soccer gear. There are meticulously restored Colonials and Tudor revivals. Walk along the red brick sidewalks of Massachusetts Avenue, which cuts through the center of town, and Lexington's Brahmin past is evident: a statue on the Battle Green of a musket-toting Captain John Parker, who led the fight against the British in 1775.

In evidence as well are signs of the burgeoning biotech industry, and the

changing face of America's elite.

Since 2000, the Asian population has ballooned from 11 percent to an estimated 22 percent of Lexington's 32,000 or so residents, surpassing Newton (at about 13 percent) and Cambridge (15 percent). Today, more than a third of Lexington's students are Asian or Asian-American. The demographic mirrors the migration of Asian families to suburbs across the country.

In the Crafty Yankee or the Asian bakery across the street, you are likely to bump into electrical engineers from Seoul, physicists from Beijing and biochemists from Boston. They teach at Harvard (10 miles away) and run labs at M.I.T. (11 miles). They hold top positions in the pharmaceutical companies that dot the Boston-area tech corridor. More than half of the adults in Lexington have graduate degrees. And many want their children to achieve the same.

In many ways, students in Lexington are the byproduct of the self-segregation that Enrico Moretti writes about in his book "The New Geography of Jobs," which addresses the way well-educated, tech-minded adults cluster in brain hubs. For their children, that means ending up in schools in which everyone is super bright and hypercompetitive. It's hard to feel special.

Best-selling authors and child psychologists have long urged parents to divest themselves from their child's every accomplishment, thereby sending the message that mental health matters more than awards. In Lexington, the attack is more comprehensive, involving schools, neighborhoods, churches and synagogues. It is riffing off research that shows that resilience and happiness, reinforced by the entire community, can be just as contagious as stress and depression.

"You need to bring along everybody," said Ms. Abeles, whose campaign has taken her to towns with similar communitywide efforts, including Elkins Park, Penn., San Ramon and Burbank, Calif., and New Rochelle, N.Y.

Peter Levine, associate dean for research at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts, says that communities that bond to promote pro-social behavior can be powerful inoculators for young people.

"Family problems are often community problems," he said. "They need

community solutions.”

No one is more aware of this than Ms. Lasa, who grew up here, earned degrees from nearby Springfield College and Lesley University, and then returned to the district — watching all the while as the population morphed from relatively laid back to Type A. She often wakes to emotional emails from parents delivered to her inbox after midnight. Most, she says, are about their children’s academic standing, and the tone is often disappointment.

Last fall, as 557 bright-eyed freshmen gathered in cushioned folding chairs in the auditorium for orientation, she gave a speech that over the last few years has come to focus more and more on stress reduction. She begged the students to make mistakes. “Do not believe that you must acquire straight A’s to be a successful student,” she said. “If you and/or your parents are caught up in society’s picture of success, let us help you change the focus.”

Students are now required to meet with counselors when choosing courses to talk about their academic loads. The practice is largely seen as a way of keeping students from overscheduling to beef up their college transcripts.

“We are trying to change a culture that is deeply rooted here,” Ms. Lasa told me in a sunny Boston accent as she barreled through the school. She was showing off the 45-minute free period she instituted this year, allowing — or in some cases, forcing — students to take time to unwind. Some were playing basketball in the gym. Others were talking with teachers. A few hung out in classrooms, chatting with friends. An awful lot, though, were getting a head start on homework.

Ms. Lasa says she is trying to “balance all the messages” they are getting about success and happiness. The one she wants to most impart is: “Slow down.”

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The paradox of Lexington High School is that while indicators of anxiety abound, so too does an obsession with happiness. A large banner from the town’s newly formed suicide prevention group, a chapter of the national organization Sources of Strength, greets students as they enter the sprawling red brick building, proclaiming: “Be a Part of Happiness.” There are close to 50 students in the group.

Below the banner are remnants of their project to spread positivity. Students were asked to write down their sources of strength, which were then posted beneath the banner and on Facebook. Some named their pets or friends. One wrote: “My mom.” Another: “Trip to Israel!” A girl with green hair: “Chicken curry.”

One morning in February, students in “Positive Psychology: The Pursuit of Happiness,” a popular elective, were following up on a discussion about the psychologist Barbara Fredrickson’s “broaden and build” theory, which posits that negative emotions like anxiety and fear prompt survival-oriented behaviors, while positive emotions expand awareness, spurring new ideas, creativity and eventually building skills.

“Today, we are going to look at pretty simple ways to make it more likely that you experience positive emotions on a day-to-day basis,” Matthew Gardner told his “Happiness” students as they pulled out notebooks and pencil cases. The class discussed the benefits of exercise and eating foods that release feel-good hormones. The students also learned that smiling and being smiled at releases dopamine, which has an uplifting impact.

Mr. Gardner offered an alternative to smiling: “Our brains are not so perfect that, sometimes, if you hold a pen or pencil like this” — he held a pencil between his teeth — “you activate some of the same face muscles. You might get a little bit of a dopamine effect, too.”

Several students held pencils between their teeth to test the theory.

At one point, the class practiced laughter yoga, raising their arms slowly as they breathed in, then lowering them as they breathed out, and bursting into peals of laughter. Afterward, the students recorded changes in their pulse rate to demonstrate research from the HeartMath Institute that shows heart rates slow down and smooth out after bouts of good feeling.

“It’s not just that your heart rate goes down and you become very calm,” Mr. Gardner explained. “It’s that the shape of your heart rate is smooth and more controlled. Frustration is more jagged.”

Their homework assignment: Do laughter yoga or “smile at five people you

wouldn't normally smile at."

The effects of smiling are also taught in the A.P. Psychology class that Gili Grunfeld is taking, and it has informed her thoughts on stress. On a winter afternoon, she and several classmates were uncoiling in the Rock Room, making friendship bracelets and sketching in fat coloring books. A Post-it that read "Unplug" was taped to the wall clock. The students were bemoaning how so many of their peers develop "tunnel vision," in Gili's words, about schoolwork and extracurricular activities, sacrificing sleep and time with friends.

"They isolate for academics," she said glumly.

Soon the students had changed topics, and were discussing the ice that had caked the school parking lot that morning and how to balance on it. The subtext, once again, was well-being: How much can friends support each other if both feel overwhelmed?

"Are we more likely to fall or are we more steady if we hold onto each other?" asked Jocelyn Geller, a junior.

"I feel like if you have a friend with you, you feel safer," said Millie Landis, a sophomore, pulling Jocelyn up and wobbling on the floor with her to demonstrate. "But you could pull each other down."

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The district has increased the number of counselors and social workers, including those working in the district's elementary schools, and expanded the training they receive in identifying and supporting at-risk students.

Cynthia Tang, whose parents emigrated from Taiwan, has been a counselor at Lexington High for 12 years. Warm and well-liked, she organizes workshops addressing the pressure on Asian students to succeed, borrowing insights from the childhood discord she experienced with her own parents as well as research on biculturalism. Studies show that the less assimilated parents are to American culture, the more stressed the children.

Adding to the pressure, she says, are cultural differences in how parents,

raised abroad, and their offspring, raised in the United States, are expected to process setbacks and strife: American educators routinely encourage students to share their feelings; not so in Asia.

“I really see a lot of this being bicultural conflict,” Ms. Tang said. “When you have one side of the family holding one set of values and the other embracing a new set of values, that inherently creates a lot of misunderstanding and a lot of tension.”

Ms. Tang says that the disconnect is compounded by a lack of knowledge about the various routes to success available in the United States. Last year, she was brought in by the vice president of the local Chinese-American Association, Hua Wang, to help plan the college forum, a three-hour event on Father’s Day. Dr. Wang, an engineering professor at Boston University, wanted to shift the focus away from a guide on applying to top colleges.

Despite resistance from the organizers, he and Ms. Tang prevailed. At the forum, she presented a slide show celebrating the academic trajectories of respected Chinese-Americans: the fashion designer Vera Wang went to Sarah Lawrence College; Andrew Cherng, the founder of the fast-food chain Panda Express, went to Baker University in Kansas; the best-selling author Amy Tan, San José State University. Parents were surprised. But, Ms. Tang said, “I think a lot of parents felt like: ‘What do I do with that information?’”

This year, organizers will delve deeper into the differences between the Chinese and American systems, and are planning to add another new element: a panel discussion on combating stress. Dr. Wang said they want to showcase families who have adopted a more “holistic view” of education. Selected parents of graduating seniors will be asked to talk about how they encouraged their children to get enough sleep, comforted them when they came home with B’s and discouraged them from skipping ahead in math to be eligible for higher level classes earlier.

This would not be the only time that Dr. Wang has engaged in this kind of dialogue. Using the Mandarin words “danding,” which means to keep calm and steady, and “ruizhi,” which means wise and farsighted, he has initiated conversations on WeChat, an online chat room popular among Chinese parents.

Recently, he told them: “Calmness and wisdom from the parents are the Asian child’s greatest blessings.”

But the message was not well received by everyone. Among the posted responses: “If your child gets a C, how do you get to a point of calm? You think we should be satisfied because at least he didn’t get a D?” And: “But my heart still whispers: Am I not just letting my child lose at the starting line?”

One parent, Melanie Lin, found herself, too, in a heated conversation on WeChat after early-admissions decisions arrived last school year. She urged the other parents to stop bragging on the site about acceptance letters to top-tier schools: “If it’s only those students who are attending the big-name schools that are being congratulated, then the idea being passed on is that only those students are successful, and attending a big-name school is the only way to become the pride of your parents.”

Dr. Lin, who works at a pharmaceutical company, emigrated in the 1990s from Beijing to get a Ph.D. in biochemistry from Arizona State University. She says her rebuttal annoyed even close friends, whose online responses accused her of trying to deny parents and their children their moments in the spotlight.

Recounting the conversation with me brought Dr. Lin to tears. “There is just so much pressure,” she said. For her, the struggles are not theoretical. On the home front, she too can be just as obsessed as her peers, she says.

Her daughter, Emily, would agree. During junior year, she dreaded car rides and family dinners — any time, really, that she was alone with her parents — because conversations routinely veered back to college. Now a senior, Emily has eight A.P. and 13 honors classes under her belt. She is also a violinist, choral singer, competitive swimmer and class vice president.

For a chunk of her high school career, Emily was one of those who “isolated for academics,” working into the early morning hours on homework and waking up, sometimes before dawn, after only five or so hours of sleep. She skipped birthday parties and lunch to squeeze in more studying. “I was never doing anything for pure fun,” she said. “I put my head down and I was always running somewhere with some purpose.”

But as a member of a youth board for a teen counseling center in town, she realized that her study habits were unhealthy. To get support for herself and others, she helped launch the town's Sources of Strength chapter. She has assisted in planning student outreach events and spoke up at a town meeting about "the dog-eat-dog" competition that still persists at the high school.

Homework remains heavy, students say, particularly in high-level classes. Class rankings may be gone but students have a pretty good sense of where they stand. And while there has been talk of a later start time to the day so students can get more sleep, the idea is on hold.

In December, when early decisions came in, Emily found out she was deferred to the regular admissions pool by Yale, her top choice. Parents on WeChat were more sensitive this time around, but accepted seniors still bragged on Facebook.

Since then, Emily has been admitted to nine universities; rejected by three, including Yale; and waitlisted by Harvard and the University of Chicago. She is deciding between Columbia and Duke.

Through it all, she has wondered if it's worth it.

"I lost out on a lot of high school," she had told me as she waited for college decisions. What she hopes is that students who come after her find some balance before their time at Lexington is up.

Kyle Spencer writes frequently for The Times on education.

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