Not Too Cold and Not Too Close:
How Can Educators Reduce Stress for the Highest Performing Students in Washington, D.C.?
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Rationale

Nearly two decades after the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and five years since the signing into law of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the reality of uniform achievement across race and social class presents a stark contrast to the ideal of 100% of high school students entering a post-secondary college or career. According to the *Washington Post*, in our nation's capital during the 2018-19 school year, 37.1% of students were rated proficient or advanced in English Language Arts, and 30.5% of students were rated proficient or advanced in Math (Stein, 2019). Yet despite the distance that must be covered to achieve the lofty goals of ESSA (formerly NCLB), there are many, many public school students in D.C. who are high-achieving, meaning they pour their hearts into receiving strong marks in their coursework, and/or high-performing, meaning they achieve strong results on standardized assessments such as PARCC or Advanced Placement exams. For these students, the pressure to perform well academically exists in addition to the everyday pressures of D.C. life, which may include exposure to violence, food and/or housing insecurity, and family/relationship challenges. Educators are left to discern how best to help reduce stress levels in their highest performing students.

Literature Review

CASEL (the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) defines social and emotional learning as "the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions." According to the CASEL website (2019), social and emotional learning can vastly improve students' academic and behavioral lives, especially for individuals who grow up in poverty. Similarly, in 2015, the AEI/Brookings Working Group on Poverty and Opportunity study recommended: "Educate the whole child to promote social-emotional and character development as well as academic skills" and noted that "the key" is to "rebuild the trusting ties to competent adults." The ASPEN Institute's "Integrating Social, Emotional, and Academic Development: Action Guide for School Leadership Teams" (2019) affirms that daily implementation of social-emotional learning supports are integral to increasing equity for students who, regardless of background, culture, immigration status, income, language, or disability, are preparing for college and career. O. Conner, et al, (2014), found that students who are high-performing also experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and lack of sleep. Their research suggests that students may benefit from close ties to several teachers, rather than just one adult in the school building.

Data/Tools/Process

In my research, I distributed a survey to employees at D.C. Public Schools and Public Charter Schools. Forty-seven teachers and eight school staff members completed the anonymous survey, which asked for individual information on years of experience in education, knowledge of social-emotional learning, and comfort with implementing social-emotional supports. Respondents also identified factors that negatively and positively impact high-performing students, and they commented on their own experience with supporting social-emotional learning while also maintaining high academic expectations.

Data Analysis

A majority of respondents consider themselves knowledgeable of social-emotional supports and comfortable implementing these supports. Yet over 80% also believe that there is a need for more social-emotional support for the highest achieving students. A majority of educators observe these students experiencing internal and external pressure to perform well in school. Survey respondents commented that students feel pressure from testing requirements, poor teaching, and a school's administration and/or culture, which may not allow students to voice their own needs and desires for education.

Four out of five survey respondents agreed that strong relationships with faculty and staff, a teacher's classroom organization, and clear expectations from faculty are the factors that have the most positive impact on high-achieving and/or high-performing students' academic learning. Deep learning in the classroom, social-emotional support during the school day, and robust relationships between family and school were also highly believed to have positive impacts on students' academic learning. Several survey respondents commented on the need to give students time to decompress during the day, including more time outside, more celebrations, and more fun activities. Respondents also noted that students need time in school to complete meaningful tasks, not worksheets. Survey respondents said they currently support their highest performing students' social-emotional growth with daily check-ins, clear expectations, and community building.

Recommendations

To maintain their high academic performance, and reduce personal stress, students need to have the space and time to take ownership of their own deep learning. They cannot be coldly expected to comply with an onslaught of work projects and deadlines, and they also cannot be too closely embraced with social-emotional activities that detract from rigorous academics.

School communities should collect data to determine high-achieving and/or high performing students' social-emotional needs, respond to the data through school-wide initiatives that are encouraged by school leadership, develop a team to continually check-in with students and staff members on progress toward both academic and social-emotional learning goals, include student and community voices in the celebration of both academic and non-academic achievements, and reduce work packets in order to make more time for deep, meaningful learning experiences.

Further studies should be conducted to determine how to best provide students who are already high-achieving with the social-emotional support needed to reduce stress and foster growth.

References

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