Education Week

Why Do We Value Achievement Over Mental Health? A High School Senior Speaks Out

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Schools must step up to prioritize student well-being

By Gabrielle Weber

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I've struggled with my mental health as long as I can remember. It started with forcing myself to sleep on the ground as a little girl because I didn't feel like I deserved my bed. Eventually, it escalated to having to call my dad from the counselor's office my junior year of high school to tell him that I had hurt myself at school. As someone who struggles to feel worthy enough to ask for help, I've felt alone most of my life. Ironically, in that struggle, I could not be further from alone.

I came to that realization after I opened up to my mom. I broke down after a family gathering and admitted to her how much I struggled to form personal connections I felt safe in. She replied with something unexpected that shattered my heart: "It's OK. We all feel that way." After talking openly about that day with friends, I quickly realized that feeling alone wasn't the exception. It was the rule.

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High schoolers, how many times have you heard something like, "I stayed up until midnight pulling an 'all-nighter'"? I was one of those people. At one point in my life, I often joked that by getting three hours of sleep and chugging a five-hour energy drink, I could say I got my eight hours. Such incredibly unhealthy behavior is a normalized part of student culture. Achievement is blatantly valued above health. This prioritization instills in students the

feeling that we're not good enough, making it difficult to reach out. In short, it sabotages learning. You know, the thing we go to school for?

Without our health, whether that be emotional, mental, or physical, students will not be able to learn. Maybe they can manage temporary memorization, but a teenager running on nothing more than the hyper state that anxiety causes and a few hours of sleep won't absorb the things he or she needs to learn. That is a scientifically proven fact. When a student's stress response is activated, that student's brain cannot absorb long-term learning because its focus is on escaping danger.

However, a good student is expected to "suck it up." No one advocates for the students struggling to live up to unreasonable standards because that struggle is viewed as ideal. It's seen as virtuous, when in reality, it's extremely detrimental.

In order to solve this problem, schools must prioritize well-being as the fundamental foundation of learning. It should never be a question for kids whether they'll have someone to turn to when they need it. Expanding supportive staff in schools—including psychologists, counselors, and social workers—would provide the kind of support students both need and deserve. Students with disabilities, disorders, problems at home, and many other disadvantages are particularly affected by the current lack of support in schools. We can do better for them and for our community as a whole. We need to do better.

The amount of built-in support at schools for students is extremely limited. The most important source of support built into schools is counselors, who on average must manage 482 kids. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as many as 20 percent of students are estimated to have a mental illness, meaning there are **96 students with a mental illness per school counselor**. With 15 percent of students **estimated to have a developmental disability**, that's about 72 students per school counselor. Additionally, if nearly 47 percent of students have experienced an adverse childhood experience such as abuse, neglect, the death of a parent, or community violence (as the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health found), that's about 226 vulnerable kids each school counselor is expected to be able to keep afloat.

There's no way to ensure that many struggling students get through the school year, let alone develop the kind of trusting relationship that is needed to get students to open up about how they truly feel and what they really need. You can't look into someone's brain and see the internal struggles they go through every day. That invisibility tends to make people ignore mental and emotional health, but it is the exact reason why we need to pay closer attention to it.

Gabrielle Weber is a student, a writer, and an advocate for mental health in Middleton, Wis. She will be entering 12th grade this school year.