

A Sense of Urgency

IT'S LUNCHTIME on a Tuesday and my high school student advisory council has joined me for our regular meeting. They arrive with meals in hand, greeting one another and me. Sometimes I have a specific agenda item for them, and sometimes they just begin talking. Today, they wanted to return to a topic we had discussed over the course of the year — their social and emotional wellness.

In particular, the 12 kids around a conference table wanted to address the pressure they feel to “do it all” in the pursuit of getting into the “right college.” These are kids who love their school and their community.

They know they are fortunate to be in a community where education is valued. But they are feeling pressure most adults did not feel during their high school years.

The students, mostly sophomores and juniors, didn't want to vent or complain. These students shared ideas of how we could make it better. They are so smart about it. They know there isn't an easy fix or one variable we need to shift. They recognize a local culture of high expectations, the American drive to achieve, pressure on parents for their kids to succeed, stress on teachers to deliver high test scores ... and peer pressure.

But they also are looking to the

adults to help to make it better. They are looking at us to do something. That is where the sense of urgency comes in.

Picking Up Pace

At the end of the meeting, one of the students said, “I appreciate that you are listening. But I am a sophomore. Will I get to experience some of the changes and progress before I graduate?” My answer was that if he doesn't get to see it, knowing that change is slow, I will feel a sense of failure.

We are at a crossroads in education. We know suicide is on the rise, mental health and wellness are growing concerns across our country,

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and the pressure to perform is out of control. We also know it is difficult for us to make changes because someone will not like it. Someone will want to hold on to what makes them comfortable even if it doesn't put students at the center of our decision making.

However, our fear cannot stop us from making changes that allow us to positively impact the development of each of our students. Our students are counting on us. And I feel a sense of urgency for that student who asked me for help with all the hope that I, or that we, could provide it.

Encouraging Risks

So what can we do? We can encourage students to take courses they have a passion to study. They don't need a

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lege applications." Let's promote experiences that develop their personal interests and spark their curiosities.

Also, we should teach students how to solve problems instead of solving problems for them. Maybe even let them fail. Taking risks, facing challenges and learning to carry on when times get tough will build the grit to navigate the multitude of life's challenges they will inevitably face.

Finally, let's assure our kids it is acceptable to take some downtime. Everything in life is not about getting to the next rung on the ladder. Sometimes, it's OK to just be a kid.

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