

THE NAPERVILLE NORTH WAY

Daily Herald

Naperville North student writes about school's 'pressure culture' -- and community responds

Posters at Naperville Central High School encourage healthy ways to cope with stress: coloring, playing music, exercising, talking to a friend, sleeping or playing with a pet. Naperville school leaders are increasing their focus on student mental health after three student suicides in two years and a student's petition to end the "pressure culture" at the school.

Tessa Newman, a junior at Naperville North High School, wrote an online petition called "The Naperville North Pressure Culture Must Change" to call for the school, parents and students to work together to make more career options seem desirable and redefine a broader idea of success.

A Naperville North High School student touched a nerve and sparked a communitywide conversation when she posted an online petition seeking to change the "pressure culture" at her school.

That culture defines one narrow route to success and shames all who can't or don't want to follow it as failures, while instilling the belief "there is no worse fate than failure," junior Tessa Newman wrote late one night after one of her peers died by suicide.

She thought her petition would draw a perfunctory "thank you for sharing" and not much else from the school administration. But she underestimated the stir her words would create.

"The Naperville North Pressure Culture Must Change" has drawn more than 1,900 signatures from students, alumni, even former teachers.

School officials and the mental health community, already facing their own concerns about the effects of increasing pressure on students, read Newman's thoughts, too. They've taken the 1,440-word treatise as a call to improve student coping strategies, build awareness of mental health resources and promote a willingness to seek help when in need.

Not all can keep up

"At Naperville North, there is one path to success. This path is made clear from the day high school anticipation begins, and is reiterated until graduation. From the age of 13, every prospective Naperville North student understands that this path makes no exceptions, and those who wander off or fall behind are left for failure. Everyone here understands that there is no fate worse than failure." -- Tessa Newman's "Pressure Culture Must Change"

Such a culture doesn't arise from the school alone -- on that educators, mental health professionals and community leaders agree.

The causes are many, Naperville North Principal Stephanie Posey said. "I will say unequivocally it is not just a school issue; it is not only a community issue, but a nationwide issue."

Parents want their children to succeed academically to prepare for college. Colleges expect more and more of the students they let in. Peers hold each other to high standards for activities and involvement.

Students internalize these expectations and berate themselves when they feel they're falling short.

The broader ideals and expectations of the prosperous suburban region become a self-fulfilling prophecy challenging everyone to exceed, excel, do it all.

Not everyone can keep up.

Vulnerable to struggle

"If success is not an option, anything is better than failure. Not trying is better than trying and failing. Doing drugs feels better than the sting of failure. And tragically, you may now understand that to some students, death is better than failure."

At Naperville North and every high school across the area, some pressure-weary students rebel, others check out. Some turn to drugs or alcohol, others injure themselves, stop basic self-care or refuse to leave the house.

Naperville psychologist Laura Koehler says she sees all of these behaviors among students she treats at Linden Oaks Behavioral Health.

Yet within this pressure chamber that is the suburban high school, some students keep pace or stand out.

They take the Advanced Placement classes, play sports, perform music, volunteer endlessly -- and achieve it all quite contently.

Others check off all the right boxes but do so unhappily -- with far too little sleep and not a second to spare for themselves after classes and clubs, school and sports and hours of homework.

Any of these students could be vulnerable to mental health struggles as they confront the competing demands of their lives, Koehler says. Naperville Unit District 203 already has school counselors, social workers, psychologists and problem-solving teams, but the district is ready to do more.

"There is an emerging focus in this country on mental health issues," Naperville North Principal Posey said. "We'll be on the forefront."

It's gone too far

"Let's say a student chooses to follow the path to success, the 'Naperville North Way.' This student must have straight A's, but not in regular classes. No, that's too easy. A terrifying schedule packed with honors or AP classes until this student reaches the age where there are only AP classes."

Newman doesn't want the "Naperville North Way."

What she wants is a future as a musician, a future she said is made to feel like a fallback option for someone who's not smart enough -- someone with a 3.8 GPA instead of a 4.0.

"I am constantly judged by teachers and students because I wish to major in vocal performance," Newman said. "I am told on a regular basis by people I hardly know that I am going to fail and to do something else, like teach."

The cause of these pressure-filled experiences has competition at the root.

"We work with our older teens on picking two to five big things (activities) and focusing on them and trying to do them well. I see too many teens that are overstretched." -- Kandice Henning, Alive Center founder
"We work with our older teens on picking two to five big things (activities) and focusing on them and trying to do them well. I see too many teens that are overstretched." -- Kandice Henning, Alive Center founder - I almost feel like we're in an epidemic of ubercompetitiveness," says Kandice Henning, a Naperville native and founder of a teen gathering space, Alive Center. "Everyone wants their kid to do the best and be the best, and it seems like it's gone too far."

College-consumed

"Academics must be everyone's priority in order to get into that 'good college.'"

Teens now compete to be the best in every top-level course, all at once, says Jared Mason, a Naperville native and teen director at the Alive Center who taught English at Neuqua Valley High School.

"A lot of students put on themselves this idea that if they aren't living up to that level of excellence, then they don't belong," he says.

Parents don't always help.

At many schools, parents can set up alerts to be notified when their child's grade drops below a designated level.

"Instead of communicating" about these lower grades, Mason says, "it's more of like a knee-jerk reaction."

These sometimes-overbearing parents want their children to get into prestigious universities with rigorous standards. This is not new.

But decades ago, college preparation didn't necessarily begin on Day 1 of high school, psychologist Koehler says. The focus on the future has become excessive and prevents teens from learning to live in the here and now, dealing with any feelings -- pleasant or stressful -- as they arise.

"You're preparing for college the minute you get into high school now, which I feel like in my day, junior year we started doing that stuff," Koehler said. "When you're a freshman and already thinking about college, you're not quite being present and engaged. It is a contradiction."

It's OK to seek help

"Stop teaching us, your students, that there is only one way to be a student. Stop treating community colleges, trade schools and apprenticeships like failing destinations. Stop paving the one true path to success."

Newman insists her petition wasn't a knee-jerk reaction to the latest student death by suicide at her school, one of 137 teen suicides in the six-county region since 2012. It was her effort to voice what she expected would be an unwelcome message: "There needs to be multiple paths to success so that one bad test grade or report card does not leave students feeling hopeless. Staff, students and parents need to

have equal parts in making this change."

"You'll still fail a class, get cut from a team, get a B, wreck your parents' car. ... It's very natural. What I fear for our students is that they don't have the coping mechanisms to be able to come back from that. We need to do a better job of giving them the resources and the strategies and the experiences to really be resilient." -- Stephanie Posey, Naperville North High School principal

"You'll still fail a class, get cut from a team, get a B, wreck your parents' car. ... It's very natural. What I fear for our students is that they don't have the coping mechanisms to be able to come back from that. We need to do a better job of giving them the resources and the strategies and the experiences to really be resilient." -- Stephanie Posey, Naperville North High School principal

Posey said the school is committed to stepping up its role, making students more aware of mental health resources and instilling a belief that it's OK to seek help.

One way to encourage counseling is to reframe it as athletic training or private music lessons for the mind, says Katy Leclair, executive director of 360 Youth Services in Naperville.

Parents don't think twice about hiring a one-on-one coach for a sport or instrument. So they shouldn't shy away from seeking a counselor, psychologist or psychiatrist, especially when their children's stresses reach the point of interfering with their daily lives.

"It's important to seek help when the challenge is beyond your ability to manage," Leclair said.

"We take very seriously our responsibility to support kids and families to ensure they're safe -- but we need each other and our community partners, people we can depend on. We all have a significant role to play in caring for each other." -- Dan Bridges, Naperville Unit District 203 superintendent

"We take very seriously our responsibility to support kids and families to ensure they're safe -- but we need each other and our community partners, people we can depend on. We all have a significant role to play in caring for each other." -- Dan Bridges, Naperville Unit District 203 superintendent

To build student self-awareness and emotional management, District 203 will implement a new social and emotional learning curriculum next year. Superintendent Dan Bridges said the district plans to better publicize parent education events that relate to mental health, which have been offered several times since 2013 but have been poorly attended.

Failure is part of life

"Many of us struggle with learning disabilities, with mental health issues. Many of us need a helping hand to trudge that narrow path. But that is not the 'Naperville North Way.' Instead of helping us, you tell us to give up and accept our failure."

One topic Principal Posey said will be a particular focus is failure -- redefining it and teaching students how to manage it.

"A common thread is our students fear failure," Posey said. "We haven't done a very good job as a community teaching them resiliency and that failure is part of being successful."

"I've always taught my children that failure is a part of life, and as a parent, you also need to teach your child to fail. It's a combination of the parent and child working together to make sure that high school doesn't get overwhelming." -- Terry Fielden, Naperville Unit District 203 school board member

"I've always taught my children that failure is a part of life, and as a parent, you also need to teach your

child to fail. It's a combination of the parent and child working together to make sure that high school doesn't get overwhelming." -- Terry Fielden, Naperville Unit District 203 school board member
District 203 school board member Terry Fielden says he's tried to teach "failure is a part of life" to his children and to high school students who seek internships at the architecture firm where he works.

"We need to help our children learn to balance," Fielden said.

Learning strategies to cope with failure instead of avoiding it is key, psychologist Koehler says.

One such strategy she introduces in the Linden Oaks teen anxiety program is creating a "self-soothe kit" of items to inspire calm -- maybe a family photo, a stress ball, hand lotion, a word search -- anything to engage the mind and drive thoughts away from stressors, if only for a moment.

The program also encourages use of mindfulness, deep breathing and positive imagery to bring the mind into the present, even when it wanders to the mounting list of pressures and concerns.

"We all should be helping kids and teens to understand and manage those struggles," Koehler says, "rather than try to make them go away."

A new path

"Start letting us choose how we wish to be defined. Start helping us find our dreams and give us the tools we need to achieve them. Start understanding our priorities instead of implementing yours. Start defining success as any path that leads to a happy and healthy life."

If adults say "yes" to what kids want and support them in their dreams, students will start learning and participating for themselves, for their passions -- and not to compete with someone else, Alive Center's Henning said. Then a new meaning of success can emerge, focused less on achieving any certain profession, prestige or social status.

"The bar is being raised too high, and we've lost our sense of what is success," she said. "We want to support these kids in figuring out who they are and what they want to do and try to drop that pressure."

In the aftermath of her poignant essay, Newman said she's honored to have expressed concerns that are troubling so many of her peers, yet she's "bewildered" by the broad response, which is giving her a spotlight she never sought.

"I am not advocating for what I believe in because I want the attention," she said. "I am surviving the attention to bring awareness to what matters: mental health assistance, multiple paths to success and equal involvement among students, parents and staff."

Superintendent Bridges concurs; it will take a cooperative effort among the entire community -- indeed, all of the suburban region -- to solve the excessive pressures placed on high school students. The solution, just like the problem, must come from all sides.

"We all have a significant role to play in caring for each other," he said, "Especially caring for our kids