Making Caring Common School Campaign
Actions to Reduce Excessive Achievement Pressure

Making Caring Common’s new national campaign seeks to mobilize high schools and middle schools to prepare young people to be constructive citizens who create a better world. Learn more about the campaign at highschools.makingcaringcommon.org.

To join the campaign, we are asking schools to commit to take action to advance one or more of the following goals: 1) deepen students’ care for others and their communities; 2) increase equity and access for all students in the college admissions process; and 3) reduce excessive achievement pressure. These goals align with and build on our successful Turning the Tide initiative that has engaged more than 175 college admissions offices nationwide.

This document offers school leaders the opportunity to take the lead in this work by committing to a significant, new action to reduce excessive achievement pressure in their schools. (Our other goals—increasing equity and access and promoting concern for others—are taken up in separate documents.)

Why achievement pressure?
While in many communities, students lack access to key academic resources and opportunities, such as AP courses, in many middle- and upper-income communities especially, students are overloading on AP courses and extracurricular activities and fierce pressure to attend high-status colleges is taking a large emotional and ethical toll. Rates of depression, delinquency, substance abuse, and anxiety, for example, appear to be considerably higher in these communities than in the general population of adolescents. Research suggests that achievement pressure is a prime culprit (Galloway, Conner, & Pope, 2013; Luthar & Becker, 2002). The intense focus on personal achievement can also crowd out concern about others and the common good.

The goal of our campaign to reduce achievement pressure is not to reduce rigor, but to work with a motivated group of high schools to generate a “positive contagion,” creating a healthier balance between challenging students academically and ensuring that students care for themselves and others.
How can schools take the lead?
Below is a menu of specific actions that you might take to reduce excessive achievement pressure at your school. Please don’t feel confined by the list. Any new, significant steps to advance this goal will support our collective cause. What’s important is that the action is meaningful enough to significantly decrease students’ achievement-related stress.

We are specifically interested in new actions or efforts to substantially augment existing actions to advance this goal. By “new” we mean a commitment that is at least in part a response to this request to join the campaign. If you are making a commitment aligned with this effort, we hope to include your school among a group of schools taking the lead to make a difference in an upcoming report that we expect will attract significant media attention. We know that certain changes can take time, and commitments to make changes to be implemented in the future are entirely sufficient at this point. We also know that many of you are utilizing promising practices that would be valuable to share, and will be in touch in the coming weeks about ways you can share these practices.

If your school is committed to taking any of the following actions, please let us know by emailing highschools@makingcaringcommon.org or filling out the online form at https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/commit-take-action.

We have had conversations with scores of high school leaders and counselors, parents, and admissions deans over the last few years and one lesson has been clear: individuals and single institutions cannot correct the current problems with college admissions, create a healthier balance in students between concerns about achievement and concerns about others, or create greater access for large numbers of economically disadvantaged students. We need to act collectively.

Your school’s commitments

We, __________________________[name of school], commit to the following (please indicate to us which of these steps your school is committed to taking):

- Ensure that school staff reaffirm the importance of balance between academic rigor and care for self and others. This may include:
  - Regularly assessing school culture and pace of life by reviewing student survey data in an ongoing effort to create a schedule and culture that is balanced and promotes adequate sleep, pursuit of interests outside of school, and overall student well-being. [Challenge Success www.challengesuccess.org and Making Caring Common www.makingcaringcommon.org are two organizations that provide helpful support to schools in examining school data and striving for balance.]
  - Systematically training all school staff in how to recognize and respond to
student symptoms of stress, anxiety, or depression related to excessive achievement pressure. Briefly surveying staff at least once a year on the types of student problems they are observing and whether they feel equipped to deal with them.

- Assuring that students have reasonable homework loads that reduce undue achievement pressure. To ensure adequate time for student rest and recovery, you might consider offering most weekends and school holidays as designated “homework free” times, and minimizing homework assignments over summer vacation. Briefly surveying students once a year to determine whether homework loads are causing high stress and take further steps to reduce homework if necessary.
- Adjusting school and/or exam schedules to reduce pressure for students. This might include replacing the traditional eight block schedule with a schedule that allows for fewer courses daily or coordinating exams and major projects across departments. Exams can also be scheduled to take place before student holidays, and not after them, to ensure that school vacations can serve as genuine periods of academic rest. Briefly surveying students to assess whether these steps reduce excessive stress.

- Make a consistent, compelling case to students to consider a wide range of colleges, including colleges that are not typically considered “elite,” and support them in pursuing admission to excellent colleges that are not highly selective. This may include:
  - Meaningfully exposing students to colleges that vary in selectivity. You might, for example, create opportunities for alumni of less-selective colleges to share compelling stories with students and parents, or require students to read Colleges that Change Lives [https://ctcl.org/], which provides examples of excellent colleges that tend to fly under students’ and parents’ radars. You might undertake a marketing campaign, beginning as early as elementary school, that elevates a wide range of non-selective colleges. You might also eliminate communications to parents and prospective students that tout the percentage of your graduates who attend highly selective colleges or that name the specific colleges students attend.
  - Educating parents and students about tuition rates and/or scholarships available at a wide range of schools.
  - Reducing the influence in your school of commercial rankings such as U.S. News & World Report, which have little to do with a college’s real educational value. This might include a joint statement with other schools that describes to students and parents how commercial ranking systems commonly mislead students and fail to capture colleges’ actual educational value and that strongly encourages parents and students to ignore these rankings while directing students and parents to more meaningful sources of information about colleges. In addition, schools can encourage local parents and/or students to share qualitative (non-ranking) information about colleges with each other in a school forum or online message board.
Place more value on the quality of students’ academic engagement than on the number of branded or test-driven advanced courses (such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate-designated courses) that they take. Large numbers of students across the country do not have access to advanced courses, and increasing students’ access to these courses is critically important. At the same time, students in some schools feel compelled to take more advanced courses than they can reasonably handle. In these situations, schools should take steps to reduce the pressure on students to overload on advanced courses. These steps may include:

- Having clear guidelines in place before allowing students to enroll in multiple AP/IB courses each year. College students rarely take more than four college-level courses at a time, so consider setting advanced coursework limits. For example, you may limit the number of AP/IB courses that students may take annually to 1-3 or limit student enrollment in advanced courses to a smaller number of total courses throughout high school. You might eliminate AP courses altogether. Briefly surveying students to assess whether these changes reduce stress.

Take new steps to reduce stress created by overloading on extracurricular activities. This may include:

- Discouraging students from enrolling in a large number of extracurricular activities and/or setting guidelines related to students’ participation in extracurricular activities. For example, while you might support students in trying out a range of activities, you might also actively discourage students from involvement in more than a few hours of extracurricular activities each day. You might also work with school staff to limit the number of hours students attend activities and sport practices each week. Assess each semester whether fewer students are overloading on extracurricular activities and try new strategies if needed.

Collaborate with parents to reduce excessive achievement pressure. This may include:

- Creating a new “compact” or agreement with parents that spells out what your school will do and what is expected of parents in reducing achievement-related stress. Briefly survey parents to determine whether this compact is affecting their behavior and try new strategies if needed. Expectations of parents in this compact might include:
  - Exposing students to a wide range of colleges and postsecondary opportunities.
  - Avoiding preparation for standardized college admission testing before 11th grade, except where such preparation increases college access and equity for low-income and otherwise marginalized students.
  - Limiting students’ extracurricular and academic activities to ensure they have adequate time for sleep and free play each week.
We would be thrilled to have you join this campaign. Please consider taking one of these steps—or generate an idea of your own! Ready to commit to an action? Click here or email highschools@makingcaringcommon.org.

This document was developed in consultation with Challenge Success.

References