

Managing Stress in a Challenging Environment

I HAVE HAD THE PRIVILEGE of working with the faculty, students and families of The Westminster Schools for over 10 years. When speaking to groups of parents, I am frequently asked the following question (in one form or another): "Is Westminster an academic 'pressure cooker' that causes our children to be stressed out and anxious?" Usually this question results in a discussion that reveals a concern from many parents regarding how to balance the benefits of having your child attend an accelerated, challenging, and enriching environment with the risks that such an environment may create the feeling of pressure and stress.

Obviously, Westminster is a unique environment. The student body is comprised of exceptionally bright students who typically are involved in a number of extracurricular activities. It is not at all unusual for Westminster to graduate classes that boast National Merit Scholars in the classroom, state champions on the athletic field, award-winning musicians and singers, incredibly talented actors and actresses, and students who have contributed significantly to their community through outreach and service projects, to name a few. The "talent pool" at Westminster is rich and deep.

I have often described this unique environment as something of a "two-edged sword." On one hand, this type of environment creates a desire for excellence that can be contagious. On the other hand, some students may feel as though they are chronically under-achieving, despite the fact that they are doing fine. It has been my experience that some students and parents lose their perspective in the midst of such a gifted population. I have spoken with students who are achieving well above national norms in the classroom, participating in extracurricular activities, and who maintain a number of friendships. However, they describe feeling inadequate in comparison to their gifted friends. I have also spoken to parents who seem to feel that their child is "failing" if he or she is not on track to obtain admission to the best universities in spite of the fact that the child is doing fine in school and exhibits model character and behavior.

It is my opinion that this loss of perspective is the primary source of stress at Westminster. Allow me to offer some suggestions to help buffer your child (and you) from what I refer to as PLS (Perspective Loss Stress) syndrome:

1) Understand and appreciate the uniqueness of the Westminster population.

Westminster is a highly concentrated pool of gifted and talented students. A child who is doing "average" work at Westminster is doing very well overall.

2) Understand the unique God-given strengths and weaknesses of your child.

Don't expect your child to manifest his highest levels of achievement in areas that are not his natural strengths. Allow and even encourage your child to develop his natural areas of strength. Remember that siblings usually do not match one another in these areas.

3) Avoid comparing your child to other students or to siblings.

This is not only unfair, but is potentially very harmful. Mom, imagine going to the beach and hearing your husband say, "That's a nice swimsuit, dear, but it looked better on that girl in Sports Illustrated." Dad, imagine returning from a dinner party to hear your wife say, "You know, John is smarter and more interesting than you... and he has more hair." This is how your child feels when he believes he is being compared to his siblings or to his peers who may be achieving at a higher level in some

area. If you feel your child is simply neglecting his responsibility, make it an issue with *him*, but leave other people out of the discussion. Watch out for those "implied comparisons" we parents tend to make as well.

4) Resist that notion that your child should participate in every opportunity that is available.

It is tempting to encourage your child to take advantage of every opportunity available, as long as it seems like it is a healthy activity or would look good on a college application. This can result in the dreaded SOB syndrome (Schedule Overload/Burnout). Take a look at your child's schedule. If there is not adequate time for things like sleep and recreation, it is only a matter of time before stress symptoms will start to manifest.

It is my belief that Westminster is not inherently stressful. However, any environment that consists of extremely talented individuals has the effect of challenging those within the system. Some personality types thrive in this type of environment while others feel pressure. For the latter personality type, it is important to keep performance in perspective and avoid adding to the feeling of stress by over-emphasizing grades or setting up unrealistic and unnecessary goals. ❧

Dr. Mark Crawford

Mark Crawford will present a workshop for parents on
 "Helping Our Children Manage Stress"
 Tuesday, 3/19 from 2:30 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.
 Warren Lecture Room, Robinson Hall

Students Visit the Atlanta History Center



High School students visited the Atlanta History Center to hear Edmund Morris, author of Theodore Rex. Pictured with Mr. Morris are (front row, L-R) William Ezzell, Mr. Morris, Christy Ostrowski, Christopher Lee (back row, L-R) Sarah Beasley, Matthew Godleski, Ross Kimbel, John Pope, Peter MacKenzie, and history teacher Ashton Richards.