

Educating Teens in the Era of Stress & Distraction

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Executive Summary

As part of a National Science Foundation program designed to learn about challenges in secondary education, we traveled the country and interviewed more than 130 high school teachers, counselors, principals, and district leaders. This report summarizes the key themes that emerged from these interviews. The most frequently reported impediments to student learning were (1) stress, (2) distraction, (3) misuse of technology, and (4) rising rates of mental illness. Strategies for addressing these challenges as well as barriers to change are discussed.

Introduction

The National Science Foundation created the Innovation-Corps (I-Corps) Program to bridge the gap between scientific discovery and real-world problems. This program supports scientists in stepping out of their laboratories to learn directly from the people who their research is intended to help. With funding from the U.S. Dept. of Education, our team at UC Santa Barbara has been developing a digital learning platform for delivering personalized e-courses to high schools. Our task in I-Corps was to travel around the country and speak to those working in secondary education to learn about their challenges. We interviewed more than 130 high school principals, teachers, counselors, superintendents, and other district leaders in New York, New Jersey, Indiana, Illinois, Minnesota, Texas, Washington, Alaska, California, and Washington D.C.

“What are the biggest impediments to student learning at your school?”

We began each of these 130+ interviews with this question, and we were surprised at the consistency in the answers we heard given the diversity of schools we visited. No two schools are the same, and there are lots of challenges in secondary education. Yet there were four themes that clearly stood out as challenges for the majority of schools: stress, distraction, unhealthy use of technology, and rising rates of mental illness.

Challenge #1: Toxic stress

Stress was highlighted as a challenge in nearly every interview we conducted. Regardless of school location, size, or funding, students across the country are experiencing considerable levels of stress. This is consistent with a recent survey by the American Psychological Association revealing that during the school year teens are the most stressed age group in the United States.¹

However, our interviews also made clear that the sources of student stress vary. The three most common sources mentioned were (a) pressure to achieve, often initiated by parents but also instilled in students themselves, (b) overwhelm due to having too much on their plates, and (c) problems at home.

About half the principals we spoke with mentioned that “something major needs to change” to create a system where students don’t walk around feeling immense pressure. Common strategies for reducing stress included reducing the number of classes per day and creating a more comfortable physical environment for students. Most principals noted that they also had resources in place for the students that were suffering the most but that school-wide solutions were still needed.

The most highly recommend solution for dealing with stress we encountered was the *Challenge Success* program developed at Stanford University. This program argues that our society has become too focused on grades, test scores, and performance. They partner with schools, families, and communities to embrace a broader definition of success and to

¹ American Psychological Association: Stress in America. (2013). *Are Teens Adopting Adults' Stress Habits?*

implement research-based strategies that promote student well-being and engagement with learning.

Challenge #2: Distraction

The second theme was that distraction is out of control. If students aren't paying attention, they're not learning. Yet we repeatedly heard that levels of distraction are getting worse year by year. Teachers said that they believe the three most common distractions in class are cell phones, internet on students' laptops/tablets, and students' stressful thoughts.

We observed a pattern in which teachers were by far the most likely to mention the problem of distraction. When asked candidly about how often their students pay attention during class, the majority of teachers said they suspect that their students pay attention less than half the time. Many teachers said classroom engagement was the single greatest challenge they face in helping students learn and that even a 5-10% increase in focus would be a game changer. However, principals were somewhat less in touch with the seriousness of this problem, while district leaders were the least likely to describe distraction as a serious issue.

Notably, relatively few people we interviewed placed the responsibility for increasing focus on students themselves. The two most common strategies used to address distraction were (1) integrating more engaging instructional methods, and (2) restricting technology use. District leaders were the most likely to emphasize the need for better instructional methods. Teachers acknowledged the need for effective instructional methods but were less convinced that was an adequate solution. Almost everyone acknowledged the prevalence of student distraction caused by technology use, but there was also broad sentiment that restrictive

policies were difficult to enforce. Additionally, a handful of teachers noted that even when students had physically put their phone away, it was clear that *thoughts* about their phone were distracting students from class.

Challenge #3: Unhealthy use of technology

Over 80% of those we interviewed expressed concern regarding students' relationship with technology. The most common concerns included (1) a sort of "addiction" to phones, (2) overuse and misuse of social media, and (3) a lack of awareness among students about how technology usage affects well-being and time management.

Teens are increasingly using technology all day, every day, making it a very powerful force in students' lives. This ubiquity also makes technology use very difficult to manage, and this trend is likely to continue. Parents and schools both face this challenge, and a coordinated solution among entire learning communities would be ideal. However, that also feels unrealistic to most educators. Even within a given school, we heard how challenging it can be to get all staff to implement a shared technology policy.

Technology policies varied substantially across schools. Many schools reported success using phone lockers during class, especially during times when students wouldn't be using other devices. Other schools reported some success with using web filters and other software to restrict and monitor internet usage, but even schools with the strictest technology policies described their solution as not adequately addressing the problem.

Although reception was mixed, several schools we spoke to had brought a screening of the movie *Screenagers* to their school. This short

documentary film explores how technology affects child and adolescent development, and for at least some schools it appeared to be an effective way of starting a more meaningful conversation about technology use.

Challenge #4: Rising rates of mental illness

The last theme we encountered in our interviews was that rates of mental illness—like ADHD, depression, and anxiety—are increasing among students. Research supports this conclusion, revealing that rates of mental illness are staggeringly high right now. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 32% of adolescents suffer from clinical levels of anxiety.² Additionally, 3 million adolescents in the U.S. suffer from clinical levels of depression, making depression twice as common among adolescents than in adults.³

Schools are often expected to address this rising incidence of mental illness, but they are rarely equipped with the necessary funding, resources, and staff. Especially among counselors, principals, and district leaders, there was a clear recognition that, by necessity, mental health was becoming a higher priority. Most schools we spoke to had resources available for students with the most severe mental health challenges, though they often felt their staff was stretched too thin and that resources were insufficient. In several interviews we heard principals say something along the lines of, *the thing that keeps me up at night is the fear that one of my students will commit suicide.*

² Harvard Medical School's National Comorbidity Survey (NCS). (2007). *Lifetime prevalence DSM-IV/WMH-CIDI disorders by sex and cohort.*

³ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)'s National Survey on Drug Use and Health. (2017). *Past Year Prevalence of Major Depressive Episode Among U.S. Adolescents.*

There was strong interest in universal mental health promotion and prevention programs, but few schools reported implementing effective school-wide training. Several schools were in the process of developing more robust social and emotional learning (SEL) curricula, and some reported finding value in the *Guide to Schoolwide SEL* that was developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).

Barriers to solving these problems

The challenges highlighted in this report are difficult problems to solve. Although hardly an exhaustive list, we identified a number of obstacles through our interviews:

- 1. Skepticism that these challenges are solvable.** While many people we interviewed were optimistic about the possibility of solving these problems, we also encountered a large portion of individuals with an understandable skepticism and even resignation. These are complex issues that are the result of numerous interacting factors, many of which are outside the control of schools. This leads some to feel that it's simply unrealistic to solve these challenges.
- 2. The absence of accountability.** For issues this complex, there is inevitably a shared responsibility in solving them. Yet one consequence of that shared responsibility is that there is often no clear accountability. Even among those who felt these problems were solvable, they didn't necessarily feel that they themselves were responsible for solving them. In many cases, they couldn't identify anyone who was clearly accountable for finding solutions.

3. Lack of financial resources. Among some schools, there was a strong sentiment that limited financial resources was a major bottleneck to solving these challenges. As one example, some schools mentioned not having sufficient funding to provide students with adequate mental health services. According to the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average salary for a school psychologist is \$77,430.⁴ Funding is often not available to provide every student with the support they need, so many schools are searching for effective low-cost solutions.

Takeaways

Distraction, stress, misuse of technology, and mental health issues are serious challenges in high schools. Across more than 130 interviews with teachers, counselors, principals, and district leaders, these challenges emerged as the most consistent impediments to student learning. These intersecting challenges affect the academic achievement and well-being of millions of teenagers each year, and schools are struggling to find and implement solutions.

There are no quick or easy fixes. Nevertheless, we remain optimistic that solutions to these issues can emerge. Many structural factors cannot be changed, but we can collectively empower students to be resilient in the face of life's inevitable difficulties. Regardless of how easy or feasible it will be to solve these challenges, we see no alternative except to try.

⁴ Federal Bureau of Labor's Occupational Employment Statistics. (2017). *Occupational Employment and Wages: Clinical, Counseling, and School*.

Although the misuse of technology is a major problem, digital interventions are one example of a significant opportunity for technology to play a positive role in students' lives. Fortunately, we live in an era where digital interventions can support students' mental health in an increasingly effective and affordable way.⁵ The accelerating pace of technological innovation is ushering in a future where every student can have access to relatable and personalized instruction that teaches them how to care for their own minds.

⁵ Mrazek, A. J., Mrazek, M. D., Cherolini, C. M., Cloughesy, J. N., Gougis, L. J., Landry, A. P., et al. (2019). The future of mindfulness training is digital, and the future is now. *Current Opinion In Psychology*, 28:81–86.

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