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# New Jersey School District Eases Pressure on Students, Baring an Ethnic Divide

By KYLE SPENCER DEC. 25, 2015

This fall, David Aderhold, the superintendent of a high-achieving school district near Princeton, N.J., sent parents an alarming 16-page letter.

The school district, he said, was facing a crisis. Its students were overburdened and stressed out, juggling too much work and too many demands.

In the previous school year, 120 middle and high school students were recommended for mental health assessments; 40 were hospitalized. And on a survey administered by the district, students wrote things like, “I hate going to school,” and “Coming out of 12 years in this district, I have learned one thing: that a grade, a percentage or even a point is to be valued over anything else.”

With his letter, Dr. Aderhold inserted West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District into a national discussion about the intense focus on

achievement at elite schools, and whether it has gone too far.

At follow-up meetings, he urged parents to join him in advocating a holistic, “whole child” approach to schooling that respects “social-emotional development” and “deep and meaningful learning” over academics alone. The alternative, he suggested, was to face the prospect of becoming another Palo Alto, Calif., where outside stress on teenage students is believed to have contributed to two clusters of suicides in the last six years.

But instead of bringing families together, Dr. Aderhold’s letter revealed a fissure in the district, which has 9,700 students, and one that broke down roughly along racial lines. On one side are white parents like Catherine Foley, a former president of the Parent Teacher Student Association at her daughter’s middle school, who has come to see the district’s increasingly pressured atmosphere as antithetical to learning.

“My son was in fourth grade and told me, ‘I’m not going to amount to anything because I have nothing to put on my résumé,’ ” Ms. Foley said.

On the other side are parents like Mike Jia, one of the thousands of Asian-American professionals who have moved to the district in the past decade, who said Dr. Aderhold’s reforms would amount to a “dumbing down” of his children’s education.

“What is happening here reflects a national anti-intellectual trend that will not prepare our children for the future,” Mr. Jia said.

About 10 minutes from Princeton and an hour and a half from New York City, West Windsor and Plainsboro have become popular bedroom communities for technology entrepreneurs, pharmaceutical researchers and engineers, drawn in large part by the public schools. From the last three graduating classes, 16 seniors were admitted to M.I.T. It churns out Science Olympiad winners, classically trained musicians and students with perfect SAT scores.

The district has become increasingly popular with immigrant families from China, India and Korea. This year, 65 percent of its students are Asian-American, compared with 44 percent in 2007. Many of them are the first in their families born in the United States.

They have had a growing influence on the district. Asian-American parents are enthusiastic supporters of the competitive instrumental music program. They have been huge supporters of the district's advanced mathematics program, which once began in the fourth grade but will now start in the sixth. The change to the program, in which 90 percent of the participating students are Asian-American, is one of Dr. Aderhold's reforms.

Asian-American students have been avid participants in a state program that permits them to take summer classes off campus for high school credit, allowing them to maximize the number of honors and Advanced Placement classes they can take, another practice that Dr. Aderhold is limiting this school year.

With many Asian-American children attending supplemental instructional programs, there is a perception among some white families that the elementary school curriculum is being sped up to accommodate them.

Both Asian-American and white families say the tension between the two groups has grown steadily over the past few years, as the number of Asian families has risen. But the division has become more obvious in recent months as Dr. Aderhold has made changes, including no-homework nights, an end to high school midterms and finals, and a "right to squeak" initiative that made it easier to participate in the music program.

At a packed meeting of the school district's Board of Education held shortly before the winter break, a middle school cafeteria was filled with parents, with Asian-Americans sitting on one side and white families on the other. Some parents and students described rampant cheating, grade fixation and days so stressful that some students could not wait for them to

end. But other parents, primarily Asian-American ones, described a different picture, one in which their values were being ignored.

Helen Yin, the mother of an eighth grader and a kindergartner, told the crowd that Dr. Aderhold was attempting to hold her and her children back. At one point, a visibly upset Ms. Yin, who moved from Chengdu, China, to pursue a master's degree in chemistry, shouted to the room filled with parents, "Who can I trust?"

"I don't think limitations can help," she said later, in an interview. "If children are to learn and grow, they need experiences."

Jennifer Lee, professor of sociology at the University of California, Irvine, and an author of "The Asian American Achievement Paradox," says misunderstandings between first-generation Asian-American parents and those who have been in this country longer are common. What white middle-class parents do not always understand, she said, is how much pressure recent immigrants feel to boost their children into the middle class.

"They don't have the same chances to get their children internships or jobs at law firms," Professor Lee said. "So what they believe is that their children must excel beyond their white peers in academic settings so they have the same chances to excel later."

The issue of the stresses felt by students in elite school districts has gained attention in recent years as schools in places like Newton, Mass., and Palo Alto have reported clusters of suicides. West Windsor-Plainsboro has not had a teenage suicide in recent years, but Dr. Aderhold, who has worked in the district for seven years and been superintendent for the last two and a half, said he had seen troubling signs.

In a recent art assignment, a middle school student depicted an overburdened child who was being berated for earning an A, rather than an A+, on a calculus exam. In the image, the mother scolds the student with the

words, “Shame on you!”

Further, Dr. Aderhold said, the New Jersey Education Department has flagged at least two pieces of writing on state English language assessments in which students expressed suicidal thoughts.

The survey commissioned by the district found that 68 percent of high school honor and Advanced Placement students reported feeling stressed about school “always or most of the time.”

“We need to bring back some balance,” Dr. Aderhold said. “You don’t want to wait until it’s too late to do something.”

Not all public opinion has fallen along racial lines.

Karen Sue, the Chinese-American mother of a fifth grader and an eighth grader, believes the competition within the district has gotten out of control. Ms. Sue, who was born in the United States to immigrant parents, wants her peers to dial it back.

“It’s become an arms race, an educational arms race,” she said. “We all want our kids to achieve and be successful. The question is, at what cost?”

Alexandra Markovich contributed reporting.

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