

Is School Too Much for Students?

Montgomery Suicides Lead Educators to Ask Why Adolescents Feel Overwhelmed

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It was a routine offering on any high school calendar -- a seminar on managing teenage stress. But last week at Albert Einstein High School in Kensington, more than 60 people came to the evening session -- three times as many as attended a similar PTSA-sponsored seminar just a week earlier.

The change, administrators say, is an illustration of how life at the 1,800-student campus is quietly shifting after the suicides of two students in the past two months -- and the possible suicide of a former Einstein student in February.



Stacie B. Isenberg's seminar on teenage stress at Einstein High drew dozens of anxious parents after two students committed suicide this spring. (Photos By Lucian Perkins -- The Washington Post)

Elisabeth Stanford, 16, a popular, well-regarded junior, took her life April 19 by standing in the path of a commuter train. On March 5, another popular junior, Kanishke Karunaratne, also 16, shot himself. The suicides have many in the Einstein community searching for answers.

What could have caused them to think this was their only option? Is school and the pressure to succeed too much? How can parents tell if their child is thinking of killing himself?

"I think most kids are still wondering why they did it," said Einstein senior Chris Madrid, 17, who knew Karunaratne.

Both students were enrolled in Einstein's International Baccalaureate program, a rigorous course of study that prepares students to pass a series of exams to earn a diploma accepted at universities internationally. It is unclear what role grades and academic pressure may have played in their decisions to take their lives. A note Stanford left behind read, "This has nothing to do with grades." Nonetheless, at Thursday's meeting, many parents expressed concern about the demands made on students.

Mental health experts say that it is rarely one thing -- a bad report card or a failed test -- that prompts someone to kill himself. More often, a complex set of pressures leads teenagers to feel as if they have no alternative to suicide.

Even so, school officials and parents say the deaths are an important reminder that the rigors of teenage life should not be ignored, particularly in the Washington, area, where high expectations and high achievement go hand in hand.

"I'm very concerned about the pressure on students who live in this region," said Cathy O'Brien, whose son is an Einstein sophomore. "In other areas, kids take three or four AP exams over the course of four years. Here, they'll take that many in a year."

In some ways the deaths seem to have rattled parents more than students. Experts said that isn't unusual.

"It's normal for parents to be more alarmed -- the worst thing that can happen is losing a child," said Brian L. Meyer, executive director of the Virginia Treatment Center for Children at the Virginia Commonwealth University Medical Center. "When they see suicides happening, it's terrifying."

At the Einstein seminar, which featured Stacie Isenberg, director of the child and adolescent program at the Ross Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders -- the same expert who spoke at the campus a week before -- parents urged administrators to be more open with students about what happened to their classmates.

Principal James Fernandez decided to tell only the junior and senior classes about Stanford's death April 20, in part because he said he felt uncomfortable making such an announcement to the whole school. But some parents said all students should have been told what happened.

"This is so important. This is a matter of life and death, and we have to talk to everyone," Said Cherifi, whose daughter is a freshman at Einstein, said.

Mental health officials differ on what is the best approach to dealing with such issues as suicide. Although some encourage educators to have open discussions, others say too much talk about suicide can glorify the act, possibly encouraging other students to consider killing themselves.

"I don't know that there's a perfect solution," Fernandez told parents.

Nationwide, teenage suicide rates have been declining since 1992. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, in 2000, there were 8.2 deaths per 100,000 youths ages 15 to 19. Between 2001 and 2004 in Montgomery County, 13 young people, ages 10 to 19, committed suicide, according to the Maryland Vital Statistics Administration.

In 2003, 16.9 percent of adolescents across the country said they had seriously contemplated suicide in the past 12 months, according to the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey. About half that number, 8.5 percent, actually attempted suicide during the same period.

Even so, suicide is the third-leading cause of death for young people ages 15 to 24, and experts say that should always be a concern.

Mental health experts say the key to prevention is creating an environment where kids feel comfortable talking about what is on their minds.

"Oftentimes we see teens act impulsively when there is a stressful event, but it's usually in the context of the absence of social support -- a general state of disconnect from support systems in their world," said Richard Shadick, director of Pace University's Counseling Center in New York.

Shadick said a key component to a successful prevention program is removing the stigma surrounding the mental health issues that might lead a teenager to consider suicide.

Fernandez said educators will continue their efforts to strike a balance between maintaining the high standards required by rigorous programs such as IB and Advanced Placement courses, while remaining mindful of the stress they can cause students. Last week, Einstein teachers and counselors were given additional training on spotting students who might be in trouble. The school's half-dozen counselors also worked with mental health experts from the school system on ways to make it easier for students to discuss what's on their minds.

On Monday, many students took off from school to attend Stanford's funeral. Tuesday evening, students held a candlelight vigil for both teenagers.

IB students have begun collecting money for what they hope will be a memorial to their classmates.

"I know we need to strike a balance between grieving for them and moving forward," said Amy Sands, 16. "But we don't want them to be forgotten."