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Humanities

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The Real Reason American Schools Cause Stress

High school is not easy. College is not easy. In fact, 80% of students report feeling stressed in American schools (Bouchrika). As school-induced stress in the United States worsens, the call for a greater need of emotional and academic support for students, especially those in high school and college environments, becomes more relevant. In particular, we need to change social norms, learning mindsets, and the structure of schools to build a place where students can thrive together. Ultimately, the most essential qualities of a supportive academic environment include being able to build meaningful relationships, having the freedom of choice to determine one's own education path, and promoting inclusivity, all of which aim to support the mental health of students.

Students should be encouraged to build lasting and supportive friendships in their learning environments in order to maintain a positive emotional well-being. However, cliques and stereotypes are detrimental to constructing a supportive academic setting. In high school, upperclassmen often judge lowerclassmen for their immaturity or nonconformity to the unspoken rules of school. Furthermore, in modern-day school systems, upper and lower grades are often pitted against one another in terms of sports, social groups, academic performance, and more. For example, one of the high school upperclassmen mentioned in the excerpt *The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth* yells at the lower classmen in frustration: "I hate when stupid freshmen don't know how to walk in the hall! You walk on the right side of the hallway!" (Robbins 180).

Although slightly exaggerated, this scenario relates to what many of us experienced in high school. Due to the social pressures we would otherwise face, many individuals try to fit in to feel validated or be seen as “cool.” Additionally, these unspoken rules—even as simple as walking “on the right”—intimidate students to avoid judgment and conform to the norms of academic environments, which adds to their social stress. A supportive school, however, should not tolerate social judgment. Instead, supportive environments foster meaningful relationships between students by creating a place where students feel comfortable interacting with one another. John Gatto, the author of the article “Against School,” speculates that we should “teach [students] to think critically and independently” (Gatto 211). Although having independent learning skills is crucial to developing a healthy mind, Gatto misses the point that students cannot thrive by learning independently. Building strong relationships and gaining support from teachers is especially important when students want to take on academic challenges. Emphasizing independent learning fails to serve as a roadblock in constructing a supportive academic environment because students need other students and teachers to collaborate, solve problems together, and nurture friendships with each other.

Another quality that defines a supportive environment is a student’s freedom and ability to choose their learning style, preventing unnecessary stress and promoting motivated learning. Since the birth of the school system, one defining factor of American schools is the standardized and industrial-like structure. John Gatto, an educator and author, affirms that “school trains children to be employees and consumers; teach your own to be leaders and adventurers” (Gatto 210). Gatto emphasizes that the current school environment is very industrial—students are trained to be “employees and consumers” by forcing them to attend classes in a rote manner. Modern-day academic environments claim to support students in exploring outside their comfort

zones. However, schools then mandate that students attend school five days a week, seven hours a day, for thirty-five weeks each year. This routine never changes through grades K-12.

Furthermore, as students are forced to adhere to this daily routine, their mental health suffers, which impedes their motivation, sleep, and intellectual activity. This does not support the vision of a supportive school environment; students should be free to choose their classes and class times and schedule learning at their own pace. A supportive school should provide students with an individualized learning path that can effectively support their mental health. For example, in the graphic novel *Friends with Boys*, Maggie, a homeschooled student that recently transferred to a high school, struggles to assimilate into a public school environment. In Figure 1, Maggie glances at her packed schedule and looks nervous on her first day of school as she is coming from a homeschooled environment (Hicks 186). Especially when introducing students to a new school, school administrators should not hand students a hectic schedule without any support or care for their mental health. Students should have the freedom to choose how their schooling fits their academic goals—by varying the number of classes, types of classes, daily schedule, and more—in order to improve their emotional well-being. For example, if a student believes their workload is too heavy, they should be able to reduce the number of classes in their schedule. Additionally, if a student is not interested in a subject, a supportive school system should not require them to take the subject. This would prevent unmotivated and stressful work that does not relate to a student's interests. Thus, a supportive environment is defined by students who are comfortable with their academic workload.

In addition to feeling welcomed academically, students should feel welcomed in a supportive school environment without regard to their backgrounds. Promoting diversity and supporting different identities is crucial to building a welcoming environment because students

and teachers should not be afraid of making new friends. In one example, Maggie, from *Friends with Boys*, struggles to adapt to her new learning environment. In Figure 2, Maggie is portrayed in the background of a crowd rushing to their next class (Hicks 189). Hicks illustrates Maggie with a light color contrasted against a dark crowd, which shows that she feels alienated and isolated from her school environment. This directly contradicts what a supportive schooling environment should be. Not only should a supportive school environment allow Maggie more time to adjust to her new academic setting, but it should also maintain a welcoming attitude amongst all students. Students should embrace others, especially those who may be uncomfortable or need mental support. However, a line should be drawn between a supportive school and parent interference. One article published in the Greater Good magazine suggests that supportive schools should increase “home visits and regular parent-teacher-student conferences to strengthen connections between school and home” (Flook). Although having familial support in the academic environment may seem ideal for strengthening ties to assist students, students who grow up would often feel pressured or scared of their parents interfering with their emotional being. Instead, a supportive school environment should be able to differentiate school from home to prevent poor parenting from interfering with academics. In addition, students may “feel trapped” in current school systems since “they either have to conform to the popular crowd’s arbitrary standards, forcing them to hide their true selves, or face dismissive treatment that batters relentlessly at their souls” (Robbins 176). Robbins explains that students often feel pressured to conform to a popular crowd and suppress some of their individual characteristics. If they do not conform, they would receive bitter treatment from others that would “batter” their “souls.” In a supportive school environment, students should not feel any pressure to suppress any part of their character or the choices they make. This includes pressure from friends, family,

and the school community. Instead, diversity and identity should be nurtured from a young age, and students should be taught to embrace each other's differences and build an inclusive environment.

It is evident that the mental health of students should be the number one priority of designing a supportive school system; this includes allowing the students to build lasting friendships, choose their own learning path, and feel included in academic environments. Integrating these values into academic environments would allow schools to be stress-free and supportive to students—something that is essential to raising generations to come.

Visual Appendix



Figure 1. Maggie from *Friends with Boys* looks at her hectic schedule.

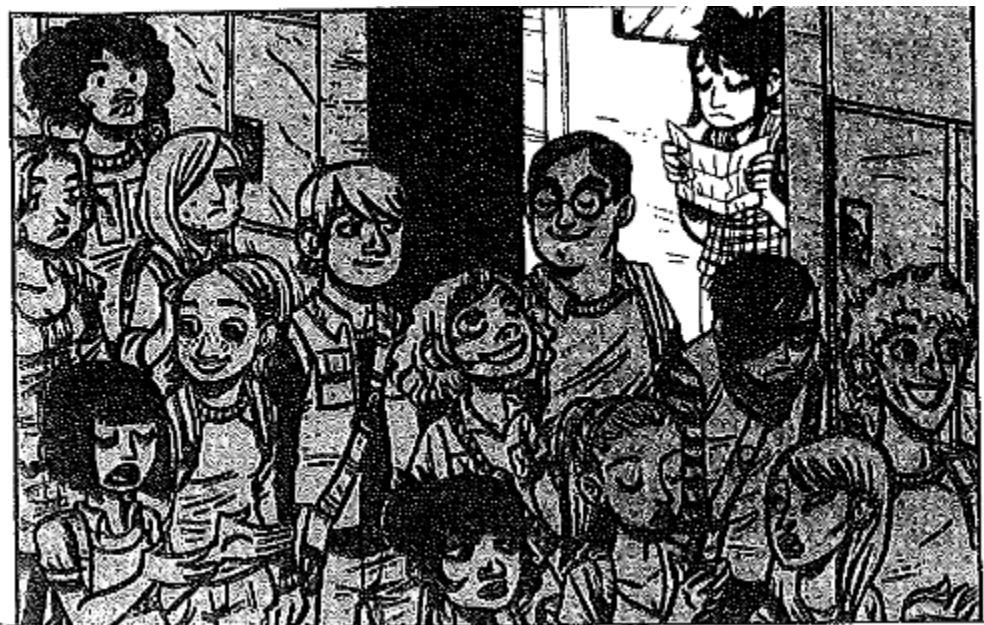


Figure 2. Maggie from *Friends with Boys* feels isolated in the moving crowd.

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