

# Educational Leadership / RESEARCH SUPPLEMENT

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## Academic Pressures on Public School Students

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INCREASING numbers of educators are becoming concerned about the pressures with which the public school students are faced. Some educators feel that these pressures are too severe and thus contribute to less than optimal conditions for development and maturation. They further venture that these pressures are detrimental to the education of those students who are confronted by the pressures (Doll and Fleming, 1966).

Data from at least two sources indicate some basis for concern. In one study (Adams, 1968, pp. 6-7) students from ages 10 to 19 identified their personal problem areas. Of all the reported areas of concerns, school-related problems were noted most frequently by these students. Leidy and Starry (1967) report an increase in time spent on homework during the period 1948 to 1967. In this national sample, 7 percent reported spending

two or more hours doing homework in 1948, 16 percent in 1962, and 20 percent in 1967.

The following are some of the crucial questions regarding school-related pressures on students:

1. To what extent are public school students under pressure?
  - a. What percentage of this population feels a great deal of pressure?
  - b. How shall we identify those under too much stress, and, perhaps, what is too much stress?
2. What are the sources of pressure on the public school students?
3. How shall educators proceed to de-

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crease stress in those individuals who are under too much pressure?

Answers to all of these questions are elusive, but questions one (b) and three are most difficult. Individuals differ widely in their tolerance of stress. A condition producing heavy stress in one individual will not necessarily bother another. Many educators are of the persuasion that some pressure, with attendant felt anxiety, is desirable in that it is motivating. Again, what objectively appears to be minimal pressure may in fact result in undesirably extreme stress and anxiety in some individuals. Any attempts to alleviate stress through decreasing school-related pressures must reflect these individual differences in tolerance. Primarily this investigation is an attempt to answer questions one (a) and two.

## Procedure

A brief questionnaire was administered to 331 public school students from grades five through twelve in nine schools. Several of the schools are suburban within large metropolitan complexes. Others are in or near urban areas of medium size. The investigators make no claim that these data are representative of the public school population in the United States.

It should be made clear that these are reports by the students themselves, and thus may be subject to errors of judgment and perceptual distortion by the students. If the purpose of the questionnaire had been to determine, for example, the amount of time students actually spend doing school work outside the classroom or whether parents are really concerned about the amount of work their children do, then such errors would cause one to question its validity. However, the primary purpose of the instrument was to determine how students *feel* toward various aspects of their school work. Unless there is some reason to suspect malingering, it is reasonable to assume that stated feelings are true feelings. The authors see no reason to suspect that students were deliberately distorting their answers in this study, and are

willing to accept responses as valid indicators of *felt* pressure.

The validity of the questionnaire is, of course, limited by its reliability. Since the instrument could be administered only once, reliability over time cannot be determined. However, some data regarding internal consistency reliability are available and are presented in another section of this report.

## Results and Discussion

Perhaps the amount of time spent on homework outside school is a primary indicator of school pressure. It indicates the action students take in response to pressure. In Table 1, the amount of time spent outside school doing school assignments is reported. There is some correspondence between these data and the data reported by Leidy and Starry (1967), although a greater percentage of our subjects reported two or more hours of homework outside school (36.5 percent as compared to 20 percent). In the opinion of the authors, two hours outside school are an excessive amount of time to spend doing school assignments—day after day. Surely that nine percent of pupils spending three or more hours are subject to undue pressure.

Time	n	Percent
One hour or less *	136	41.1
More than one, but less than two	74	22.3
Two or more hours **	121	36.5

\* 100 students (30.2 percent) reported spending less than one hour.

\*\* 32 students (9 percent) reported spending three or more hours.

Table 1. Amount of Time Spent Outside School Doing School Assignments by Number and Percent

Table 2 is a summary of the percentages of students responding yes or no to selected items of the questionnaire. Items two, five, nine, ten, and fourteen may be discussed in terms of "concern about school now." Eighty-seven percent reported talking about school-related problems, although this tells us little about the severity of the problems talked about. Our subjects do appear to be con-

cerned about school now. Responses to item five indicate that 59 percent worry a great deal about not doing well in their current school situation. Eighteen percent feel some current peer pressure to do well in school. Worrying about examinations is reported by 65 percent, and 35 percent report that school problems are their greatest worry. Three of the items, six, seven, and eight, are indicative of concern about the future. Of this population, 85 percent report plans for college and

36 percent report worry about being accepted by the college of their choice.

Items 11, 12, and 13 reflect the extent of parental concern. Approximately one-sixth of the parents are reported as feeling that their charges do too much homework, while one-third are reported as feeling that their charges do too little. The latter figure corresponds to the percentage (30.2) of those subjects who report spending less than one hour on homework (see Table 1).

The percentage of those responding positively to questions one, three, five, six, ten, and fourteen lends some support to those who argue that students are confronted with too much pressure. Certainly, a relatively large percent of these students report feeling pressure. The facts that 68 percent of these students report feeling a great deal of pressure to do well in school and that 33 percent report having dropped activities or hobbies because of school work are disturbing. Some may argue that students should feel this pressure, that after all school should be the primary concern of this population. These authors feel, however, that these data indicate a detrimental state of affairs for many of those students responding yes.

These data help to answer questions as to the sources of school-related pressure. Obviously, school personnel and the individual's own self-aspirations are two sources of pressure, but these were not directly investigated here. According to this questionnaire, parents and peers must be added to the list. That parents are perceived as a major source of pressure is not surprising. Most teachers frequently encounter parents with what the teacher would judge as excessively high aspirations for their child. As to peer pressure, school personnel have tended to view peer influence as inimical to academic performance and motivation. For 18 percent of this population this is not the case (note responses to question nine). For these students, their friends contribute to the pressure rather than decrease it.

Chi-square tests were performed between the reported amount of time spent on homework (note the three major categories of Table 1) and the responses to several other

Question	Yes		No	
	%	N	%	N
1. Have you been forced to drop some activity or hobby which you enjoyed because school work took too much of your time?	33	110	67	221
2. Do you ever talk about your school problems, if you have any, with anyone?	87	294	13	37
3. I feel a great deal of pressure to do well in school.	68	225	32	106
4. My parents apply a good deal of pressure on me to do well in school.	54	179	46	152
5. I worry a great deal about the possibility of not doing well in school now.	59	195	41	136
6. I worry a great deal about the possibility of not doing well in college.	50	166	50	165
7. I plan to go to college.	85	282	15	49
8. I frequently worry about not getting into the college of my choice.	36	109	64	222
9. I feel that if I do not do well in school my friends will not accept me.	18	60	82	271
10. I frequently worry about examinations.	65	225	35	106
11. My parents seem concerned about the amount of school work I must do.	53	176	47	155
12. My parents think I spend too much time on school work.	16	53	84	278
13. My parents think I spend too little time on school work.	33	111	67	220
14. School problems are my greatest worry.	35	116	65	215

Table 2. Percentage and Number of Students Responding Yes or No to Selected Questions

questions. The results of these tests are presented in Table 3. The following findings should be of interest:

1. Analysis of the relationship between the amount of time reported spent on homework outside school and question one indicates that those who report spending greater amounts of time doing homework are more likely to report having dropped an activity or hobby ( $p < .01$ ). The reverse is also valid; those reporting less homework are less likely to report having dropped an activity.

2. Analysis of time reported and question three indicates that those who report spending greater amounts of time doing homework are more likely to report feeling a great deal of pressure and those reporting less homework are less likely to report feeling great pressure ( $p < .01$ ).

3. Some pattern of relationship between time reported and both questions four and five exists; however, neither relationship was sufficient to result in the rejection of the null hypothesis at the .05 level.

4. Analysis of time reported and question ten indicates that those who report greater amounts of homework are more likely to worry about examinations and less homework, less worry ( $p < .01$ ). This finding hints that worry about examinations is not a function of lack of time spent in preparation for the examination, as many appear to believe.

5. Analysis of relationships between time reported and questions twelve and thirteen ( $p < .01$  in both instances) indicates that reported parental concern about the amount of homework done by the student has a relationship with the amount of time spent doing homework. That is, the student who reports spending greater amounts of time doing homework is more likely to report that his parents think that he is doing too much homework. The student who spends lesser amounts of time doing homework is more likely to report that his parents think he does too little. Parents appear to be informed.

In general, the  $\chi^2$  analyses illustrate consistency of responding, and hence give information concerning the reliability of the questionnaire. That is, students who report larger amounts of homework also tend to respond in other ways that indicate accompanying

pressure. If no relationship had been found between those reporting greater amounts of homework and those reporting having dropped some activity or feeling pressure, one could have little confidence in these data.

The  $\chi^2$  analyses also show that parents' feelings, at least as students perceive those feelings, about homework have some basis in reality. Apparently parents are aware of the time their charges are spending at school work and indicate to their charges attitudes that have some consistency with the amount of time spent. This is a gratifying state of affairs.

Indication	Chi-Square
Child forced to drop activity because of school work (#1)	33.24*
Child reports feeling pressure to do well in school (#3)	10.19*
Child reports that parents apply pressure to do well (#4)	4.46
Child reports worry about doing well in school (#5)	5.55
Child reports worry about examinations (#10)	12.71*
Parents concerned about amount of school work (#11)	2.28
Parents think child spends too much time on homework (#12)	17.95*
Parents think child spends too little time on homework (#13)	19.39*

\* Probability is less than .01 that observed relationship due to chance; all tests are based on 2 d.f.

Table 3. Chi-Square Tests of Association Between Amount of Homework Reported and Other Indications of Felt Pressure

Perhaps some mention should be made of the responses to the question relating to the activities dropped as a result of school assignments, the question "To whom do you talk?" (about school-related problems), and the inquiry as to those "Problems which bother you more than school problems." The activities reported to have been dropped were very diverse, ranging from the necessary—sleep—to such potentially meaningful (and perhaps "educational") activities as scouting, political activity, art, music; and to the expected—dating and television viewing. The responses indicate that most students are not inhibited about talking over school-related

problems—see item two, Table 2. They reported talking about school problems to friends, parents, siblings, teachers, and counselors. Responses as to other problems indicate problem areas as diverse as one would expect from an adult population—financial, interpersonal, personal, and religious. Concerns such as “finding myself,” “getting along with others,” “the world situation,” “race and hate,” “the draft,” “the lack of independence,” “communication with parents,” and “sex” were common.

Little is offered by way of conclusions based on this investigation. It would appear that there is some reasonable cause for concern, that at least some of our public school students are feeling too much pressure. It would be unwise to increase the pressures on students in any given school system, until an assessment is made of existing pressures on the students—our data indicate that schools differ widely in the pressures reported by the

students. In some schools practically all the students report a great deal of homework, but in other schools students report significantly less.

It may be desirable for the local school, or school system, to conduct its own investigation into these questions. School personnel may be surprised to learn that many of their students are not “going to the dogs”—they haven’t the time.

## References

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## A Call for Papers

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THIS RESEARCH SUPPLEMENT is not designed for publishing reviews of research issues, calls for needed research analysis, or analysis of widely quoted research studies. It has been established for the reporting of data. Criteria for selecting articles include:

1. The manuscript must report data. Included in the article must be some evidence to support the reliability of the measures used in the study.

2. The article should concern itself with the behavior of teachers (or their surrogates) and that of students as dependent variables. Behavior is taken to mean achievement scores, responses to questionnaires, etc.

3. The article should present a discussion of the results in such a manner that the meaning of the research is clear to readers. Some suggestions to meet this criterion include: a discussion of threats to the validity of the study's conclusion; an unambiguous definition of the independent variable; a distinction between the findings (data) of a study

and the conclusion pertaining to the research hypotheses; a distinction between testing research hypotheses grounded in theoretical frameworks and answering research questions for which there exists no known theoretical base; and finally establishing a basis for qualified conclusions.

Authors are invited to submit manuscripts to Frederick A. Rodgers, Teacher Corps Office, 4 Washington Square Village, Room 1-0, New York, New York 10012.

Manuscripts are welcome in all lengths, from 500 to 8800 words, typed, doublespaced. Three copies of each manuscript are required. All manuscripts will be submitted to panels drawn from the membership of the ASCD Research Council, and prompt decisions will be made regarding their publication. □

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