

I almost dropped out of high school in junior year. I was a straight “A” student, in five clubs, taking one AP and two honors classes. I felt like the “best” student I could be, yet I could barely get out of bed in the morning let alone attend my classes. My mental health reached the lowest level it had ever been, despite my struggles beginning in fourth grade. To me, school was a priority above all, even my mental health and physical well being.

I am grateful I grew up in Davis. Still, I wish the schools and community focused more on a balance between academics and mental health. Davis has always been known for high achieving students that sacrifice their free time and mental well-being to provide colleges with the most impressive resume they can generate. While I too fell victim to the “pressure-cooker” of Davis, the pandemic and being forced to stop and reevaluate the way I lived helped me develop a balance. This balance will, hopefully, be incorporated into my work ethic for the rest of my life.

If I could change one thing about our Davis community and school system, it would be the availability and quality of programs dedicated to shaping and aiding students’ mental health.

These programs should begin early in elementary school. In those years, I was taught how to deal with disputes between friends and bullies. I also frequently heard and observed the message that excelling in academics was critical to getting into a good college. While academics are important, what I don’t recall hearing, observing or learning is the importance of prioritizing self-care and mental health, as well as academics.

One example of how this might look would be incorporating more “brain breaks” into the school day. Examples of this include going outside and running a lap or having two minutes in transition times to talk with peers. Teaching young students it’s acceptable, and even beneficial, to allow their brains to rest will set them up for less stress and more success as their school work

becomes more challenging. In addition to breaks, teaching young students how to recognize and deal with their feelings in proactive ways is crucial in helping them face life's challenges. If children are taught and observe in their role models the benefits of outlets such as exercise, the arts, spending time with others, or even just simple breathing techniques, these habits will become muscle memory. This could help decrease their future stress and allow them to take more control of their mental health. Of course this is not a fix-all solution, but I know for myself and many of my peers, having these techniques taught and practiced by our role models in school would have made a world of difference.

While I feel our community does a fairly good job of allowing kids to be kids in elementary school, it was clearly communicated, even during those years, that academics were important. This message was not balanced by introducing the importance of mental health and self-care leaving our young unprepared for junior high where the academic pressure-cooker really begins.

Junior high is the first time students are allowed to have freedom in their class choices, which can lead to pressure to take the most rigorous courses. While there is nothing wrong with a student wanting to challenge themselves, there is also little need to be so stressed at such a young age. I suggest that junior high schools bring in high school seniors with all sorts of future plans (attending college, attending community college, attending a trade school, entering the workforce, and so on) for an assembly or other school sanctioned activity in which eighth graders are able to ask questions about what they would have done differently. Perhaps students could be in small groups with the upperclassmen, giving the seniors a chance to share more personal thoughts while looking back on their road to graduation. It would help strengthen the school community by allowing the seniors to form bonds with younger students.

I wish I had spent more time exploring different passions I had outside of school, such as art and earning my pilot's license. By allowing eighth graders to see the vast number of options available after high school, they may feel less pressure to impress high-level universities that have extremely low acceptance rates. This potentially benefits students in the moment as they are allowed more freedom to spend time with their friends and families, but also in the future when they will, hopefully, set more reasonable and attainable goals.

For high school students, the largest barrier to finding help is feeling like you have no one to trust. Following a recent assembly, a few peers and I discussed with administrators and counselors at Davis Senior High how to increase awareness of support systems currently available and how to reassure students that these interactions would be secure and confidential. I appreciated speaking with administrators and counselors, but it can be hard to be completely upfront with them.

Students know counselors and teachers are mandated to report certain issues they learn about students. This often makes it hard for students to confide in these adults about certain topics. My peers and I were excited to learn about local organizations that are connected with the school (including Empower Yolo) that have counselors who are not mandated reporters. We have put into action plans for an upcoming assembly where we will discuss these organizations as well as what to do if a friend or peer comes to you for mental help. As teens, we are unprepared for these situations, but if we can work with the school in a more organized fashion, my hope is that more people will receive the help they need.