

Arnav Gupta

District 1 Summer Intern

Office of Supervisor David Haubert, Alameda County

30 July 2026

Academic Pressure in District 1 Schools and Peer Led Mental Health Support

Alameda County's First District 1, which goes across Dublin and Livermore, portions of Pleasanton and Fremont, and the unincorporated community of Sunol, has some of the fastest growing and most academically competitive school communities in California. Because of this, students often see grades and academic performance as a representation of one's future, overestimating its importance. This paper examines how that pressure affects the mental health of District 1 high schoolers, using survey data collected during this internship, and argues that a peer led response is both necessary and achievable.

A peer led response is optimal because most students already have connections with peers, with whom they share their academic performance. This paper aims to find how that peer network can be redirected to supporting students wellbeing.

Across the US, academic performance is consistently one of the top stressors teenagers experience. A 2019 Pew Research Center survey found that 61% of American teens said they felt a lot of pressure to get good grades (Horowitz and Graf), and the American Institute of Stress has found that teens rate their own stress levels above what adults report for themselves, with adults rating themselves a 5.8 versus a 3.8 for students on a 10-point scale (American Institute of Stress). District 1's schools would follow this trend, and the emphasis on college admissions may even result in a more dramatic difference.

This stress for students can be seen at Emerald High School from my own experience. For many of my friends, staying up past midnight on a school night to finish homework is treated as normal rather than alarming. For some students, it is even a point of pride to be staying awake late at night for school. Other students have skipped one time events, including Junior Prom, to study for a single test, or even have become physically ill in the week after finals from accumulated stress. These stories show high school students push themselves extremely hard to succeed, past what is healthy.

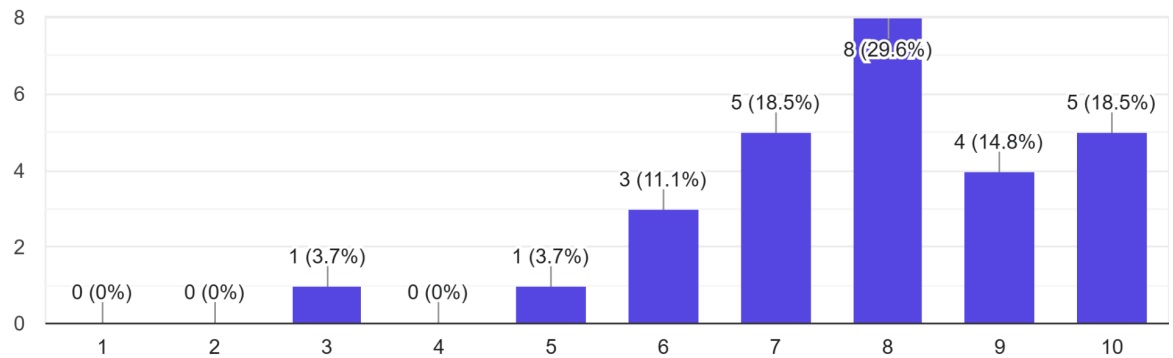
To confirm my anecdotal experience, I designed and distributed an anonymous survey using Google Forms from July 6 to July 30, 2026 through nextdoor, school wide communication groups, and through friends. The survey collected no identifying information, including email addresses, and took around two minutes to complete. It was shared primarily with students at Emerald High School, with 27 total responses recorded. Respondents spanned grades 8 through 12, though the sample skewed toward upperclassmen, with 40.7% of respondents being in 11th grade and 25.9% in 12th grade, with the remaining third split among 8th, 9th, and 10th graders.

This sample is a convenience sample with most students being from Emerald High school, so although academic conditions are most likely similar throughout District 1 schools, this survey may be biased towards Emerald High students. The consistency of responses across questions can still give a clear picture of how pressure is experienced day to day by students.

One of the most important findings was that students experienced lots of stress. When asked to rate their current academic pressure on a scale from 1 to 10, 80.8% of students chose a 7 or higher, and the average response was a 7.7. When asked how much they believe their grades will affect their life after high school, the average response was also high, a 7.8 out of 10. Both figures are significantly above the national teen stress average cited earlier from the American

Institute of Stress, which was a 5.8 out of 10. This data, while collected with different techniques, still shows the more intense academic culture in this region.

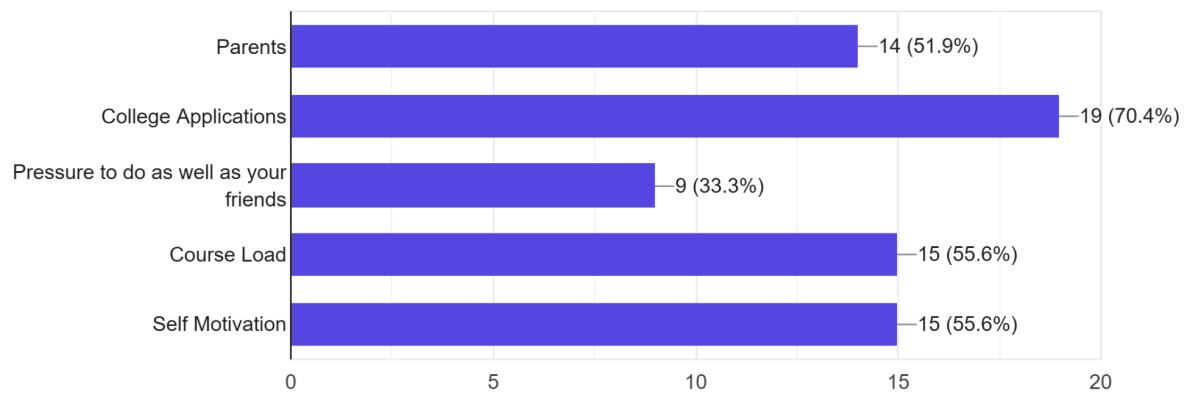
How much do you think your grades will affect your life after you leave school
27 responses



Another finding was that students tended to experience pressure from multiple different sources, especially from college applications. Students could select multiple sources of pressure, and the results show that multiple factors are important. College applications were the most common stressor, with 70.4% of respondents selecting it, followed closely by course load and self-motivation both at 55.6%. Parents were cited as a source of stress by 51.9% of students, and compared with friends by 33.3%. Self motivation and course load rank almost as high as parental pressure, suggesting that students may internalize the pressure to compete and push themselves.

Where do you feel the majority of this academic pressure comes from?

27 responses

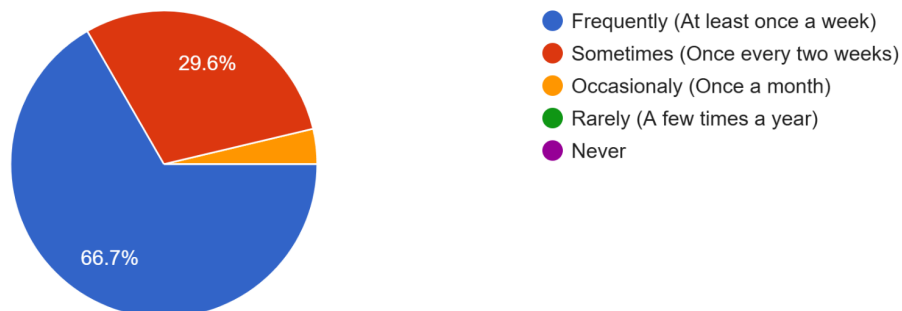


The pressure also is negatively affecting most students. Two thirds of respondents said that studying or homework negatively affects their life through sleep loss, skipped social events, worse mental health, or negative physical health effects at least once a week. 29.6% of the other students reported these negative effects once every two weeks.

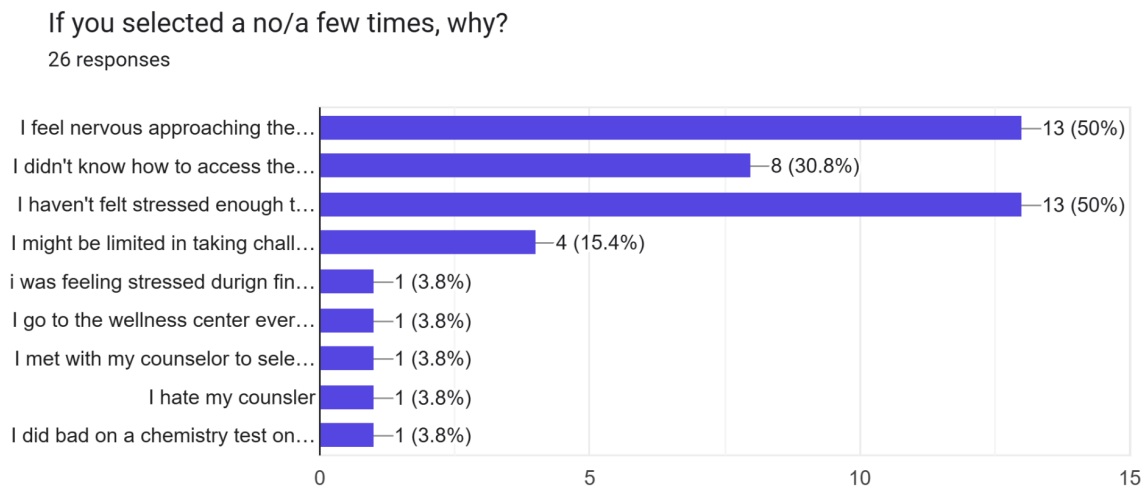
One of the most concerning findings is that 55.6% of respondents believe that focusing on their mental health could negatively affect their grades, college applications, or future career. This is a false trade off, but it is a widely held one, and it helps explain why students might do harmful things even when they recognize they are struggling. This problem may be made worse by the fact that 85.2% of students who responded to the survey know how well their friends are doing, potentially leading to negative comparisons.

How often does studying or homework negatively affect your life? (Examples include sleeping past 12 AM, skipping social events, feeling sick, worse mental health)

27 responses



Despite the high stress levels recorded, 74.1% of respondents said they had never used school counseling or wellness resources to manage academic stress. The top reasons for this were feeling nervous about approaching a counselor, at 50%, not feeling stressed enough to justify it, also at 50%, followed by not knowing how to access the resources, with 30.8%, and concern that seeking help might limit them to less challenging courses at 15.4%. In other words, the barrier is almost never that students are fine, its discomfort, unfamiliarity, or fear of consequences.



Students also generally agree that they would prefer to communicate with other students. When asked who they would most want to talk to if they felt stressed or overwhelmed, 81.5% of students chose a close friend. Only 14.8% of students said they would want to talk to their parents, 3.7% picked their counselor, and no students picked their teacher. This tracks with another finding that 85.2% of respondents said they generally know how well their friends are doing in school, meaning peer academic awareness is already high. When asked whether they would be willing to read a short, student-made guide with facts about college admissions and tips for managing stress if a friend handed it to them, 85.2% said yes. Because the majority of students are much more likely to talk to their friends rather than a trained mental health professional like a counselor, teaching students basic mental health advice to give to their friends could significantly improve students' wellbeing.

Together, these findings show that students in District 1 are not unaware that they are stressed, and they are not wanting to avoid support, they just trust a friend more than a formal system, mostly because of social discomfort rather than a lack of need. National research also supports this conclusion. A 2024 study by The Jed Foundation, based on a sample of more than

1,500 teens, found that stigma is not actually the top reported barrier to seeking mental health support. Discomfort with discussing emotions and fear of being a burden rank higher (Jed Foundation). That closely matches what District 1 students said when asked why they had not used school counseling, with being nervous outranking every other reason offered.

The same survey that shows near universal high stress also shows students already track each other's academic lives closely. The existing peer systems are an underutilized resource, because students feel comfortable talking to their friends and wouldn't feel as embarrassed if mental health advice came from a friend. A peer supported research paper that supports this conclusion found that students disclose personal struggles to friends far more readily than to official services, and generally prefer peer support over talking to a stranger (Pointon-Haas et al.). Most of that research comes from college campuses rather than high schools, but the underlying preference for friends over formal systems is most likely still the same. Redirecting that trust toward wellbeing, not towards academic competition, is the goal.

Along with this paper, I made a companion student resource guide built around the two pressure points the data identified most clearly. These are the myths that a single test, application, or grade determines a student's future, and the atmosphere of competition. The guide has facts about college and grades, pushing back on the one opportunity mindset 70.4% of respondents linked to college applications. The brochure is designed with easy to read large text and tries to make students feel comfortable with checking in with their friends. It is designed as

an around two minute read, for maximum ease of use and effectiveness.

Peer-Led Mental Health

Made by an Emerald High Student & Based on Research

Your Friends are stressed - you can help them

Contact me at 925-872-9630 if you want more info

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Grades & College

Your teachers might say that grades don't matter much

While they do matter, colleges look at the whole story

- Getting into a good college is possible with low grades
- Most careers don't care where your diploma is from, they care about your ability
- You only can go through high school once, so

Enjoy It

In crisis or worried about a friend right now? Call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) — Free, confidential, 24/7.

How to Help

Is your friend withdrawn, tired, or skipping activities?

↓

Talk To Them +

Students are much more likely to listen to other students

- Just asking them how things are going can help
- Encourage good sleep and relaxing with friends
- Don't feel embarrassed, it can just be a simple check in

This study's main limitation is the scale of the survey with 26 to 27 responses from one school. Future research should extend this survey to other District 1 high schools, such as Dublin High School, Livermore High School, and Granada High School. The county wide California Healthy Kids Survey, administered through the CalSCHLS system, already collects comparable school and district level wellbeing data and could be a useful resource if it were available(California Department of Education). It would also be worth tracking whether distribution of the resource guide measurably changes how comfortable students feel using formal counseling.

Works Cited

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