**How K12 is Outwitting Anxiety**

District leaders deploy range of strategies to confront unprecedented levels of student stress

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the best medicine—A “laughter yoga” session reduces student stress in the West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District in New Jersey. The district has also provided PD to show teachers how to conduct meditation and breathing exercises to ease their own and students’ anxiety.



Last fall, a national problem arrived in Superintendent Richard Scaletta’s corner of rural northwestern Pennsylvania. Principals in the General McLane School District began reporting unprecedented levels of [misbehavior](https://www.districtadministration.com/topic/student-conduct): students in frequent and severe distress, sometimes kicking, biting or throwing things.

By October, the district had referred 27 of its 2,100 pupils to intensive out-of-school therapy. And one morning in February, after months of information-gathering, Scaletta started school two hours late so district staff could undergo training on student mental health issues.

General McLane isn’t alone. Across the country, districts are grappling with rising levels of student anxiety attributed to everything from academic pressures to larger social forces. Schools are scheduling meditation breaks, hiring more counselors and enhancing [professional development](https://www.districtadministration.com/topic/professional-development).

Superintendents and their teams are calculating how best to maintain academic rigor without compromising students’ emotional stability.

“Our function as a school is to educate, and the only reason we’re addressing this is because it’s preventing us from educating,” Scaletta says. “I’m a little bit resentful that our society has created this mess and we’re forced to deal with it, because it’s not what any of us sign on for.”

**Educating an anxious generation**

National data indicates that about one-third of teenagers will experience an anxiety disorder, with 8 percent seriously impaired. Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that these numbers, higher than in decades past, reflect a real increase, not just a rise in reporting.

“For the first time, teens are more stressed than their parents are,” says Jonathan Dalton, a psychologist who directs the Center for Anxiety and Behavioral Change, a private treatment facility in Maryland. “It used to be ‘Enjoy your childhood. When you get to be an adult, you have mortgages and jobs.’ And now, for the first time ever, it’s flipped.”

Anxiety is also starting younger, experts say. Where students might once have worried over junior-year [testing](https://www.districtadministration.com/topic/testing), “now you’re seeing kids—in third, fourth and fifth grade—who are worrying about being kidnapped, they’re worrying about germs,” says psychologist Philip C. Kendall, who directs Temple University’s Child and Adolescent Anxiety Disorders Clinic.

In younger children, anxiety may manifest as clinginess or stomachaches; older children may report feeling overwhelmed. Some anxious children withdraw; others become aggressive or oppositional. And some refuse to go to school at all.

“Almost every high school I’m in has 10-plus kids not able to attend,” says Jessica Minahan, a former special needs teacher who consults with schools on behavior. “That’s a newer phenomenon.”

Untreated anxiety has immediate academic consequences: Students battling their fears have little mental space left for learning algebra. But the impact can outlast the school day.

Forty-five percent of students who refuse to attend school never graduate, Dalton says, while Kendall notes that teens with untreated social anxiety are over six times more likely to have substance abuse problems as adults.

Educators and psychologists offer differing theories for the apparent increase in anxiety levels—from family dysfunction to the rise of social media to the heightened competition for admission to elite colleges (see online sidebar). Whatever the explanation, school officials increasingly realize they must address the problem.

“If we don’t get this under control, then working on increasing student achievement is not going to work out, and working on integrating technology is not going to work out,” says Patty Oakley, superintendent of the 1,400-student West Bridgewater Public Schools, south of Boston.

**Helping students face fears**

To combat this damaging new reality, districts often begin by making students’ emotional [health](https://www.districtadministration.com/topic/health-wellness) an explicit priority. Last fall, after parents in the 4,800-student Hamilton School District, west of Milwaukee, raised concerns about student stress, the district incorporated social and emotional wellness into its strategic plan.

“It’s always kind of been in the background, but we put it front and center,” says Paul Mielke, superintendent of the affluent, high-performing district. The next step is creating structures to support teachers, whose training seldom includes mental health but who find themselves on the front lines of the anxiety problem.

Consultant Minahan recommends training teams of teachers, counselors and administrators to help colleagues cope with anxious students—the equivalent of the teams many schools use to address students’ academic struggles. Teachers welcome the help, superintendents say.

West Bridgewater adopted national curricula dealing with depression, social skills and classroom behavior, and hired a specialist to help with the implementation. “The teachers really did buy into it,” says Oakley, the superintendent. “They’re the ones who said, ‘We need help, this is different, we haven’t dealt with this before.’”

Effective cognitive-therapy treatments for anxiety exist, psychologists say, but for teachers, the best approach can seem counterintuitive: Distressed students need exposure to the very experiences they would prefer to avoid.

If a student who fears oral presentations is instead allowed to submit a written report, “that kid will be less likely to talk in front of class,” Kendall says. “You’re actually making the problem worse.”

Teachers need to help students learn to manage their anxiety rather than give in to it. Students should acknowledge their physical responses to fear—the knot in the stomach, the hyperventilation—and remind themselves of how they have coped with similar situations in the past.

Teachers can help with an array of specific strategies, Minahan says, such as encouraging students to keep a before-and-after record comparing how hard they expected an assignment to be with how hard it actually was. Over time, students can learn to think, “I’m freaking myself out—my initial thought was not accurate,” Minahan says.

Teachers’ more typical approach—offering praise or reassurance—won’t budge that inaccurate thinking, she says. “The most kind-hearted and well-meaning teachers tend to reinforce anxious behavior by giving attention to it or by removing demands academically,” adds psychologist Dalton. “We want to train these teachers how to respond in a differential way.”

**Building rigor and resiliency**

Schools are also trying a number of smaller-scale stress-reduction interventions, some of them aimed at heading off anxiety before it can gain a foothold. Scaletta’s district is building a corps of student social-media curators to disseminate links to positive and inspiring materials—a homegrown antidote to online conflict and cruelty.

In the 9,800-student West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District in New Jersey, concern over student anxiety spiked three years ago after a survey uncovered high levels of stress and 120 students were referred for out-of-district mental-health treatment.

In response, a recent professional development day included peer-to-peer sessions on meditation, mindfulness, yoga and breathing exercises.

One high school in the affluent, high-achieving district has begun conducting guided meditation breaks for students, and administrators are exploring ways to help teachers manage their own stress, lest adult angst infect students.

The challenge is showing staff how [social and emotional learning](https://www.districtadministration.com/topic/social-emotional-learning) “fits into the whole structure,” says Superintendent David Aderhold. “It’s not one more thing, but it’s part of how you think about your classroom management.”

Even something as mundane as scheduling can play a stress-reduction role: This year, the middle and high schools in southern California’s 4,150-student La Cañada USD are starting the day at 8:30 a.m. instead of 7:45 a.m., because a 2016 survey showed that the district’s high-performing students were averaging only 6.5 hours of sleep per night.

La Cañada hopes to create a testing schedule to ensure that students don’t face multiple exams on the same day. The district may also reduce the amount of homework teachers can assign each night.

Still, superintendents across the country struggle to strike a balance between reducing pressures on students or, instead, accepting stress as inevitable—even necessary—and teaching students how to cope.

Last year, La Cañada brought in professionals from many fields to talk about the winding roads they took to their adult successes. Meanwhile, the district’s students rack up Advanced Placement classes.

“It’s a really fine line, and we revisit it almost daily,” says Superintendent Wendy Sinnette. “We’re very committed to both challenges: making sure that we’re high-performing and academically rigorous, and making sure that we are doing everything possible to build resiliency.”