**Five-Hour Energy?**

**The Joel Barlow Wellness Myth**

Meet Karen[[1]](#footnote-1). Karen is a sophomore at Joel Barlow High School. Always an overachiever, she took all her classes at the highest level possible, and plans to take three AP classes her junior year. She also plays three sports, and belongs to three clubs. She wears makeup every day, seems like a morning person, and is friends with all her teachers.

What most people don’t see is that Karen is getting less than five hours of sleep a night, eating very little, and isolating herself from both friends and family in order to meet the sky-high expectations that have been set for her. She’s begun exhibiting symptoms of clinical depression, enough for one of her teachers to send her to guidance. She reported feelings of depression and suicidal thoughts. Her main concern? Stress from her school work.

Joel Barlow High School has been described by students and parents as a “pressure cooker” that has the tendency to force kids to crack under the intense workload. "The Fairfield County Effect" is a phrase common among parents and therapists in the area. It’s notorious for being one of the toughest schools out of both private and public schools, second only to Taft. While the school has a guidance office, the focus on mental health is dismally low, while the focus on scheduling and college applications is very high.

Part of the school mission statement reads, “Through an open and active exchange of ideas, we seek to promote values, knowledge and skills that foster meaningful inquiry, personal integrity, individual well-being, global citizenship, and continuous independent learning.” Although included in the mission statement, “individual well being” is not emphasized by teachers or administrators, evidenced by the amount of homework students have. Joel Barlow sophomore Gabby Chioffi reports that teachers don’t accommodate for the well being of their students. “All they do is give quizzes, tests, and projects on the same days, and don’t stand for complaints.”

In fact, the only two occasions that seem to spark the school into suddenly being aware of mental health are finals week. Midway through the year and at the end of second semester, the school provides different activities for students in order to relieve stress, with varying levels of success.. For example there are often therapy dogs in the Career Center during this time, or games in the gym like popping bubble wrap. While appreciated, “Stressing the importance of getting more sleep might be more effective” says Joel Barlow junior April Lichtman. During finals week, students often pull all-nighters. According to a study done by the American Psychology Association, 36 percent of students (out of 1,018) felt tired or fatigued.

In the same study, 31 percent of students felt overwhelmed and 30 percent felt “depressed or sad.” Providing small, poorly advertised outlets for stress for one week twice a year is hardly enough for students to feel relaxed. In a different study conducted at NYU, 26 percent out of 128 students reported “symptoms of depression at a clinically significant level” ([www.nyu.edu](http://www.nyu.edu)). Also reported was that stress is a common factor in mental health problems like depression and anxiety.

During the rest of the year, teachers’ awareness for mental health remains at a flatline. An adult coloring station in the library with ripped papers and broken pencils is the only noticeable thing throughout the entire school that even attempts to counter stress. Why are we not doing more for our students? Teachers and administrators need to be more aware of the stress we are under; they need to be aware of how pressing an issue mental wellness is. I urge our administration to recognize the stress we’re under and attempt to do something about it, something more than a coloring station.

For example, the school should advertise the fact that guidance is always open if a student simply needs a moment to relax and get themselves together. In addition, they should try to provide stress-relieving activities during academies and activity periods, such as yoga or meditation. Staples High School even offers yoga as an elective. This way, stress relief doesn’t fall on the shoulders of the student, who has to figure it out themselves. School already takes up most of our day.

As a matter of fact, many students complain about homework getting in the way of the rest of their lives. Barlow sophomore Maggie Green asked: “How do they expect us to do five hours of homework, two or three hours of sports or after-school activities, all the while encouraging us to spend time with our families, eat healthy, *and* get eight hours of sleep? There’s not enough hours in the day!” We’re only teenagers with families and lives who deserve more than a few measly hours of sleep a night.

When our students are complaining about no sleep or high levels of stress, they’re not whining just because they’re a little tired; it can be a serious cry for help to manage the workload of Joel Barlow High School. The lack of resources is dangerous and irresponsible. Most of them are only available during finals week when, when students don’t have time to worry about their stress. As a small high school in a small town in which many students know their teachers and administrators well, one would think Joel Barlow High School would be doing more to protect and support their students through some of the toughest four years of their lives.

**Works Cited**

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1. Karen's name has been changed at her request. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)