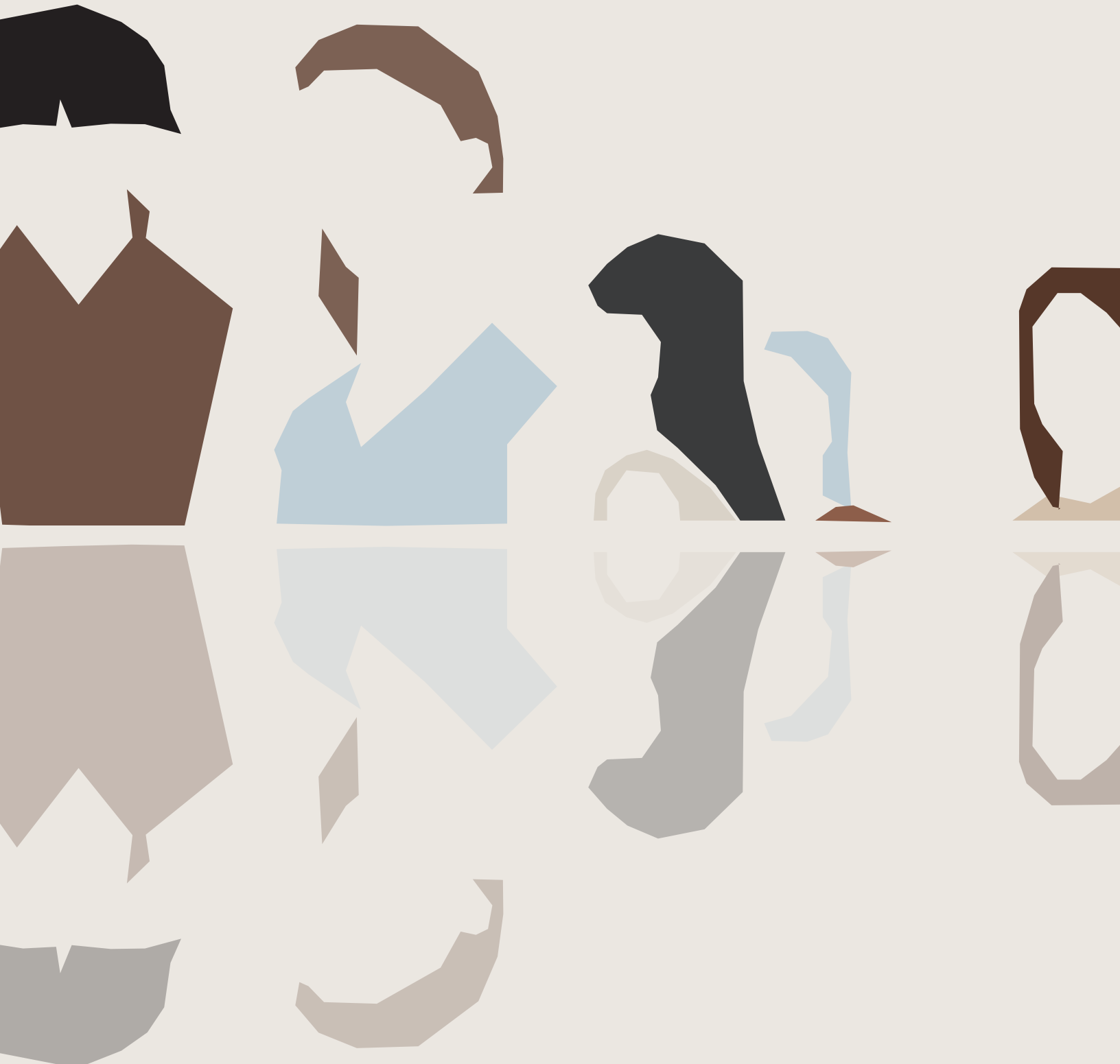


A TOXIC TRADITION

An examination of West's competitive culture and its effects on student mental health.



BY ANNA BROWN & ANJALI HUYNH

Where excellence is a tradition. These words stand tall and proud, resonating through the school in every way imaginable. From students practicing fervently in the music rooms to rows upon rows of gleaming trophies displayed in the hallways, excellence is undoubtedly a significant part of the culture at West High.

But at what cost is this “excellence” obtained? Though West boasts high standardized test scores, numerous state athletic titles and a significant amount of All-State musicians annually, the journey to these accomplishments is not without its drawbacks. The expectation to continuously perform well under high standards creates a stressful environment, which can negatively impact mental health.

“Stress places a really significant burden on the brain, just like if you were to overwork a muscle,” explained psychology teacher Travis Henderson. “Let’s say that you’re trying to get bigger biceps. If you overwork your biceps, your biceps would be at risk of being damaged; they need time to heal and repair before you work them again. The problem is that stress causes all kinds of things in our bodies.”

ACADEMICS

Her ridicule began with an onslaught of dreadful migraines.

Since sophomore year, Elisa Nisly ’19 has endured severe migraines in high-stress academic situations, eventually developing anxiety. As a

“THE GOAL OF EDUCATION SHOULD BE TO ENGAGE PEOPLE’S CURIOSITY, PUSH PEOPLE TO ALWAYS IMPROVE WITHOUT NECESSARILY REFERENCING WHERE EVERYBODY ELSE IS.”

—DOMINIC IANNONE, HISTORY TEACHER

According to the American Psychological Association, stress alone can cause fatigue, inability to concentrate and irritability. Chronic stress has the potential to result in physical harm as well by causing diseases such as depression, diabetes or anxiety. All of these factors combined create many obstacles in a student’s ability to learn or find enjoyment in extracurricular activities.

Despite movements attempting to destigmatize mental health concerns like Mental Health America and the National Alliance on Mental Illness, they continue to be infrequently discussed in an academic setting. According to a WSS survey of 28 West teachers, 53.6 percent of teachers discuss mental health “whenever it seems necessary,” 35.7 percent “rarely discuss mental health in the classroom setting” and a mere 10.7 percent of teachers discuss mental health “as often as possible.”

Through stories told from various aspects of the school, one thing is certain: West High’s atmosphere is a culture rooted in pressure and competition.

result, Nisly is sometimes unable to attend class or take exams. Despite being absent for medical reasons, she was often the subject of contempt by her peers.

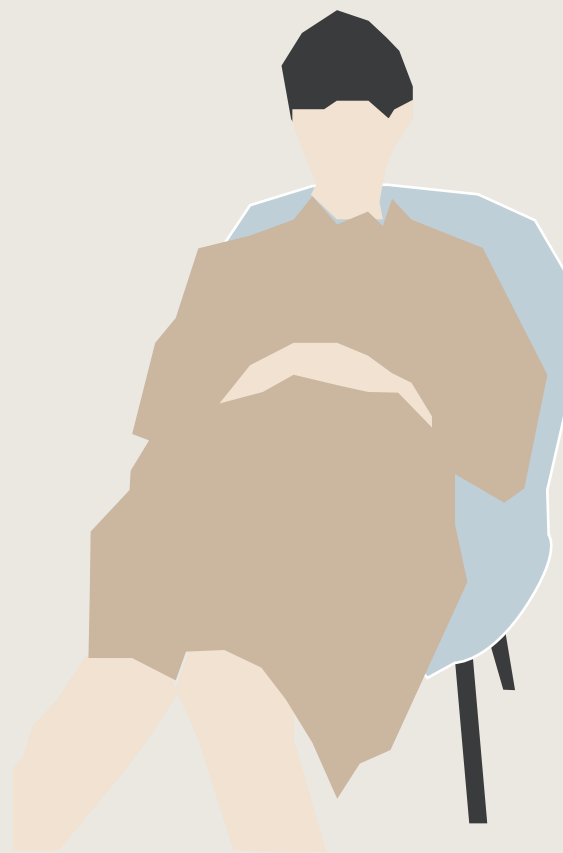
“People don’t really understand both mental health issues and anxiety in that specific instance,” Nisly said. “I think people just assume that everyone else is like them. If they don’t have a health problem, they assume that everyone else doesn’t ... It stressed me out because I felt like I had to explain myself to everyone.”

This unawareness often caused misunderstanding between Nisly and her peers, as many were not able to fully grasp the severity of her health condition.

“A lot of the time it’s people who don’t actually mean to be rude about it,” Nisly said. “But [they say], ‘You missed class because you didn’t do the homework assignment,’ and actually it’s, ‘No, I missed class because I had a migraine.’”

For years, West High has been regarded as a school of high-achieving students. Students took over 1050 AP tests in 2018, and the ACT average for West students is seven points higher than the state average.

However, according to licensed clinical psychologist Dr. Karen Nelson, these achievements come at a cost to students’ self-efficacy.



“West High students who enroll in honors and AP courses have previously done well academically,” Nelson said. “For most, receiving a grade lower than an ‘A’ is upsetting because it is new. Students often catastrophize that a ‘B’ or ‘C’ for a trimester will ruin their lives and chances to be admitted to selective colleges ... Peers who are equally nervous about preserving their 4.0 status agree when a friend freaks out about a ‘B’ grade, which reinforces high distress. There’s clear [evidence] a relationship between perfectionism, distress and motivation [exists].”

Nisly is not alone in facing mental health issues associated with high academic rigor. According to school counselor Kelly Bergmann, while the guidance department does not know exactly how many students are diagnosed with mental health disorders due to many going unreported, they work with an “increasing number of students who have mental health concerns or diagnoses” every year.

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, while anxiety disorders are the most common type of mental illness in the United States, only 36.9 percent of those who suffer receive treatment in fear of receiving backlash.

Nisly feels one reason students do not express

concerns over their mental health is because of their obsession surrounding appearances.

“People constantly want to present their best selves in settings of high competition, so [mental health] isn’t something they want to talk about,” she said. “Or, they feel like they don’t have the resources to talk about it, especially if their family is also pressuring them to do well academically.”

School counselor Kay DiLeo has also noticed the correlation between high expectations and increase in student stress levels.

“Teenagers tend to compare themselves to their friends, and since we do have [academically] high-achieving students here, you’ll have some other students compare themselves,” DiLeo said. “I think [the counselors] would all agree that high expectations produce more stress and depression.”

Social studies teacher Dominic Iannone has firsthand experience with these “high-achieving students” who are frequently severely emotionally affected due to educational stress.

“It’s rare that I have a week where I don’t have somebody who’s in here upset or in tears about something,” Iannone said. “I understand why they feel all that pressure, but I wish they didn’t. The goal of education should be to engage people’s curiosity, push people to always improve without necessarily referencing where

everybody else is, ... and the fact that people roll their eyes when you say that’s the way it should be shows how far away we are from what the vision of education could really be.”

Henderson noted that another issue rooted in the academic setting is the elitist culture formed by students.

“To students who are so focused on themselves that they can’t see the bigger picture: try to develop some empathy,” Henderson said. “I don’t want to discredit the fact that they’ve taken seven AP classes and they know how to note-take and they probably could go to college right now and be fine, ... but they need to recognize that they benefited from a system that set them up to get to that place, and not everyone has.”

Going forward, Henderson hopes that students will focus more on learning rather than competing with others.

“We all leave with some common experiences and a broad enough worldview that we can be good citizens of our democracy,” Henderson said. “That’s what makes education valuable: ... we are creating a generation of enough broad-minded citizens that we can hope that the next generation can improve our democracy ... If we could better communicate that mission, maybe we wouldn’t have people who look down on other people.”



ART & DESIGN BY
CRYSTAL KIM

MUSIC

Every year, students from all over the state compete to earn a spot in the All-State band, choir or orchestra. The opportunity to perform with this prestigious group is often the pinnacle of one’s musical career. However, the desire to perform well often takes a toll on student musicians as the pressure to succeed rises each day leading up to the auditions. Saxophone player and two-time All-State musician Yangtian Shangguan ’19 experienced this firsthand.

“I feel good about those early stages because you’re like, ‘Oh, it’s three months [away], who cares?’” Shangguan said. “But as you get closer and get frustrated, ... that probably increases the stress where it hasn’t been there in the past.”

West High produces some of the most high-achieving musicians in the state, with 51 students earning All-State recognition. According to band director Rob Medd, because West has such successful music programs, pressure is a common drawback to this success.

“West High has sort of some added pressure with All-State, because we’re one of the very few schools in the state who actually have to have auditions to get to auditions for All-State,” Medd said. “We can only register 30 band students, 30 orchestra students and 28 choir students, but every year we have more than those

“AND THE FACT THAT PEOPLE ROLL THEIR EYES WHEN YOU SAY THAT’S THE WAY IT SHOULD BE SHOWS HOW FAR AWAY WE ARE FROM WHAT THE VISION OF EDUCATION COULD REALLY BE.”

—DOMINIC IANNONE, HISTORY TEACHER

numbers who want to do auditions.”

Shangguan believes that the success within the music programs at West only contributes more to the obsessive need to do as well as possible.

“If you achieve at a high level ... I think there is some expectation that you at least continue putting the work in that you put in before,” Shangguan said. “In the band here, everyone is so good, so there’s always an expectation, most likely from yourself. But other people around you — your friends, your parents — they have expectations too, whether they say it or not.”

School counselor Kelly Bergmann echoed the effects that expectations have on stress.

“I think with high expectations comes another set of challenges,” Bergmann said. “Kids are generally more stressed, and if they don’t meet those expectations it can be a problem if they don’t have a strong support system [or] coping methods.”

Similar to Iannone, Medd experienced situations where students have come to him very distressed about the results of various events.

“It’s pretty common for students to come in upset,” Medd said. “That’s when we have those conversations about what that one thing means compared to everything else and how it should



or shouldn't have to do with your self esteem ... It has to be kept in perspective, and that's a learning process for everybody, not just for students."

Although the atmosphere surrounding the music program at West High is very competitive, Shangguan feels the community among him and his peers helps alleviate some of that stress. He sees the saxophone section as very "close-knit," which helps him focus on the enjoyment of playing rather than competing.

"We all support each other in a way [where] nobody feels any animosity towards each oth-

"MUSIC IS AN ART, THERE ARE COMPETITIVE ASPECTS TO MUSIC, BUT IT'S CERTAINLY NOT THE MOST IMPORTANT THING, AND NOT THE KIND OF MOTIVATION THAT I WANT FOR STUDENTS."

-ROB MEDD, BAND DIRECTOR

ATHLETICS

West's successful athletic program is known statewide, making these students some of the most-watched athletes in the state. But living up to a legacy is something basketball player Patrick McCaffery '19 faced years before putting on a Trojan jersey.

Since freshman year of high school, McCaffery has been a vital player on the West boys basketball team — one of the most formidable teams in the state.

"With the West High name ... there's an expectation," McCaffery said. "Whenever we go to [another school's] gym, it's packed. Everyone wants to beat West ... so there's definitely a lot of pressure that goes into playing."

Because of this reputation, McCaffery believes that the entire atmosphere changes when West does not meet these high expectations.

"The attitude in the locker room and on the bus ride home is way different [when we lose]," he said. "We don't lose very often ... so the whole attitude changes. We go to practice the next day, and it's a whole different type of mindset, a whole different work ethic ... We've always been really successful, and it's just a culture in West High basketball. You come to work."

While West's reputation contributes to the pressure, being a McCaffery only added to the need to excel. Because McCaffery's father

is the University of Iowa basketball coach and his older brother Connor McCaffery '17 experienced much success on the West High boys basketball team, he feels that others are constantly focusing on him to carry on his family's legacy.

"[My dad being a] public figure has definitely added some pressure onto me because of my last name," McCaffery said. "Everybody wants to have an expectation of me, and they want to be able to say that they have watched me play and what they think [about my performance]. That definitely adds extra pressure because people want to get fixated on me and care about what I do."

McCaffery believes that this pressure was particularly difficult when he was younger and not as experienced at handling the pressure that came with playing for such a highly regarded team.

"It was all really new to me," McCaffery said. "When I first got here as a freshman, all the other guys played varsity the year before. I was the only guy that was new. ... It was a pretty big learning curve, especially coming from junior high to one of the most successful programs in the state. That definitely was a lot of pressure."

The competitiveness that comes with playing at this high level is deeply rooted in the culture at West. West holds seven state basketball titles

er," he said. "If there's someone who might be better in some aspect than you, you learn from them ... It definitely makes it more enjoyable that some people are better at some things and other people are better at other things."

Medd also reiterated the idea that students should be performing for enjoyment, rather than being motivated solely by competition.

"Music is an art," Medd said. "Even in the professional world, there are competitive aspects to music, but it's certainly not the most important thing, and not the kind of motivation that I want for students."

and made runs at the state title every year that McCaffery has been on the lineup. However, Henderson believes that while West's competitive culture contributes to the high-achieving rigor, there are outside factors feeding into this mindset as well.

"I don't think it's just West that's creating that culture," Henderson said. "It's part of it, but

"THE SAD REALITY IS THAT WITH ALL THESE FACTORS, IT COMES TOGETHER IN A REALLY SERIOUS WAY, ESPECIALLY HERE AT WEST, AND IT DEFINITELY CREATES A VERY TOXIC ENVIRONMENT."

*-TRAVIS HENDERSON,
PSYCHOLOGY TEACHER*

West is also a microcosm of a much bigger trend that is country-wide ... and we all have to take responsibility for it. The sad reality is that with all these factors, it comes together in a really serious way, especially here at West, and it definitely creates a very toxic environment."

According to Henderson, one component of this toxic environment is the tendency to compare one's achievements against peers, and with the presence of social media, this is more prevalent than ever. Sports fans often take to social media to comment on games and McCaffery's individual performance, regardless of whether West wins or loses.

"Part of how we derive our sense of self is through comparisons with others," Henderson said. "That's sort of been an inevitability

MOVING FORWARD

In response to the recent 2017-18 climate survey results, a schoolwide poll conducted to gauge student experiences in school, West administration primarily focused on race and gender issues, as opposed to mental health. According to the survey, there was an increase of around 20 percent of students who felt that their contributions in the classroom were not valued due to race.

"[The administration] has a lot of discussions about diversity and gender issues and how we approach those in the classroom," Shoultz said. "We were more focused on hurtful comments from teachers and from students. [Mental health] is something we have touched on, but it wasn't as a result of this survey."

However, West High still has a variety of programs and systems of support for students who struggle with mental health issues. For example, West brings in counselors from Four Oaks, an organization committed to helping families succeed.

"During our open hour, kids schedule time [to] meet [with Four Oaks' counselors, and] they go on with their day," said school counselor Greg Yoder. "That has been very helpful for a large percentage of our students who have things come up, so [they do not have] to deal with another appointment outside of the building."

Additionally, there are two Student and Family Advocates who work alongside the school counselors at West High.

"John Roarick and Jamie Schneider really help us with connecting kids to outside resources," Bergmann said. "They help us a lot with students that are facing any kind of barrier: home, financial, mental health, etc. They really help us a lot with anyone who is struggling with mental health concerns. We work alongside them to provide the best support we can inside the building."

in terms of being human and interacting with each other, and I think that with the prevalence with social media, it makes it even easier to communicate with one another in that way."

Although social media is used as a tool of competition, it has become a platform for negative or malicious comments as well. McCaffery believes that with higher expectations comes more judgment and criticism.

"Sometimes it's been overwhelming ... and hard to manage," McCaffery said. "I might be upset about it, but it just goes in one ear and out the other the next day. I don't take it into account; I don't pay any mind to it. I've just grown and matured through it all and realized I can't control what they say."



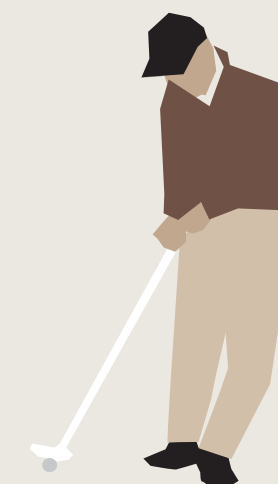
Moreover, a program called Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) was implemented at West this year. Led by professionals from the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, DBT focuses on helping students by "learning to cope with distress, communicating assertively and most of all, practicing living in the moment while decreasing self judgment," according to Nelson.

As mental health issues become more normalized, more opportunities for discussions regarding mental health have arisen. A WSS survey found that all 28 participating teachers answered "yes" to feeling comfortable discussing mental health concerns with their students. While teachers may not routinely discuss mental health in the classroom, they want to aid those that are struggling.

"Our teachers do a great job. If [students] have a conversation or write something in the school newspaper, [teachers] let us know right away, so we can follow up with them," said school counselor Paul Breitbach. "I think [students] need to talk with somebody if they can."

Medd also addressed this, citing instances when he reflected on his own personal experience to help students address their own issues.

"I have personal experience with anxiety, so I usually feel pretty comfortable talking to stu-



dents about that," he said. "Usually that tends to work out, and we have that conversation. I think it's good for students to realize that lots of people in society deal with clinical anxiety or depression, and it helps knowing that you're not the only one."

Nisly believes that students also have a role to play in creating a more accepting, positive atmosphere.

"I think the school is starting to recognize [the negative culture]," Nisly said. "It's a little bit better, but still not perfect. [Students] need to consider what other people are going through and [not] assume everyone is under the exact same circumstances as they are."

However, Henderson believes that the key to shifting this culture from one fixated on competitiveness, to one of acceptance is addressing the issue at a school-wide level and redefining what constitutes "excellence" at West High.

"I really believe that the things that teachers and administrators focus on create the reality that we all live in," Henderson said. "If you go into a classroom and a teacher everyday is like, 'This is getting you ready for the AP test,' then the reality of that class is that this is an AP test prep class ... We could do some things to change what we focus on as a community and in so doing, lessen some of those anxieties and some of those pressures."