

## **Summary of SAP COFFEE TALK, Feb. 27, 2019 on “Finding Balance”**

GBN’s Student Assistance Program (SAP) team held its first of two Parent Coffee Talks on Tuesday morning, Feb. 27<sup>th</sup> at GBN. Featured were Dr. Ryan Earl, faculty and therapist from the Family Institute of Northwestern, Dr. Eric Etherton, GBN Vice Principal, and Ms. Ann Gebhardt, GBN school counselor.

GBN parents and volunteer members of C.A.T.C.H. (Communication Action Together for Children’s Health) provided the following summary.

### ***Teens struggle daily between two opposing tensions:***

- They want to be unique, special, different, independent and carve their own path; **AND**
- They want to be part of a group, feel accepted, and not stand out.

This tension is a normal part of adolescent development, but our awareness of it can help explain kids’ behaviors that often appear illogical or inconsistent.

### ***Finding Balance and its Relationship to our Values***

Our kids (just like us) struggle to find balance in their lives. One key to this challenge is being aware of how our values impact our priorities and choices.

- Be clear of our parent values when helping our kids define and articulate their values.
- Ask “why” as often as possible to our kids, especially in response to declarations such as: “I have to sign up for...; I must get an A in this class...I’ve got to take 5 AP courses; I have to participate in 7 extracurricular activities, etc.”
- When we discuss the “why” of an activity or choice with our kids, it helps reveal what they (and what we as parents) value. Our parent behavior will often reveal (even more than our words) what we value.
- Don’t check PowerSchool daily, in fact, limit your checking of PowerSchool as much as possible. When we check PowerSchool excessively, we’re signaling “ownership” of our kids’ grades. And our kids often interpret this excessive parental checking to mean that we value their grades more than most other things about them (e.g. their happiness, mental health, physical health, etc.) Our intention in checking may be for “needed parental oversight”, but we should be aware that it’s likely not interpreted this way by our kids.

### ***“Balance isn’t achieved from better time management but better boundary management”***

- Signs that our kids are out of balance: they’re regularly sleeping less than 6 hours/night, they’re skipping meals or eating abnormally, angry a lot, anxiety ridden, or unhappy most of the time.
- Boundary management starts with discussing, clarifying and defining boundaries about what’s essential (sleep, food, etc.), what are the highest priorities and the lowest priorities.
- To help our kids define what’s important to them...ask them what they most love to do, what makes them happy, and what renews or replenishes them.
- Discuss the balance of the “must do’s” (that are a part of every high school career) with the “want to do’s” that can provide the renewed and essential energy needed for the “must do’s”.

### ***Perfectionism and External Pressures***

- Avoid using phrases like “you’ll do fine” or “you’ll do great.” This kind of language is often interpreted by our teens as increased parental expectations and demands.

- Instead, try to describe the pressure kids are feeling with phrases like “it’s ok if you’re anxious about this” or “it make senses that you would feel pressure about this.”
- Help them name and then validate their emotions, which shows them that we accept them as they are in that emotional moment, without judgement, and gives them permission to release some of the pressure they’re feeling.

### ***The meaning of “Do Your Best”***

Concerns were raised that “do your best” can be interpreted by our kids to strive for perfectionism at all costs (e.g. ignore sleep and food) in order to achieve more.

- “Sometimes good enough is good enough.”
- Raise questions such as “good enough for what”? Or “good enough for whom?” Questions like these help our kids develop greater self-awareness and internal drive.

### ***Concerns of “burnout”***

- Burnout definition: *“an exacerbation of being tired when external expectations exceed one’s internal drive or desires”.*
- Dialog with our kids on what drives them. The greater their self-awareness and understanding of their internal drives and how to nurture them in healthy ways, the more likely they are to prevent burnout.
- When our kids complain “I’m so tired”, it’s not always burnout, but often very normal. An appropriate parental response can be... “of course you are. High school is really hard, and confusing, and overwhelming and exhausting.”
- Acknowledge our kids emotional and physical states, rather than try to change, deny, or make them go away. Listen, validate and ask questions.

### ***Parents are People too – “Be Present, Not Perfect”***

- Be honest with our kids about our own anxieties.
- Example: “I want to be a perfect parent for you, but I know that I can’t, and I’m a bit scared at times too. Parenting is not easy.”
- Modeling emotional awareness can be more powerful than lecturing about it.
- Caution: It’s not our kids’ job to make us feel better. We are the adults in the relationship, and we should teach and model emotional awareness and maturity as often as possible. But, we shouldn’t expect our kids to reciprocate. It’s not their job to worry about us or make us feel emotionally better. We need to do that on our own with other adults.

### ***The pressure of College***

- It’s starting earlier and earlier.
- Remind our kids that the “best” college is not what’s listed in some top ranking.
- There will be many great college options for our kids, and usually there is not one “best” college.
- Our kids’ “job” in high school is to work on self-discovery so that when the times comes, they are informed about what they want and need in a college. This is the definition of “best fit” versus an arbitrary “best” college on some list.
- High school is a time when our kids need to work not just on academic learning but also on social and emotional skills and resiliency- skills that will be as valuable, if not more, than any AP course.