

Dr. Luthar on The State of Pelham's Youth
By Andrea Gottfried

On Monday June 10, parents, school administrators, and mental health professionals gathered at The Picture House to hear researcher and leading expert Dr. Suniya Luthar present Pelham Together's recent survey results and report on how Pelham teens feel about friendship, academic pressure, social media, substance use, and emotional well-being.

Pelham Together, in partnership with Pelham schools, surveys 8th, 10th, and 12th graders every two years and, this year expanded the survey to collect information on our young people's mental and emotional health, as well as substance use. The results included a comparison of Pelham to national statistics and other like schools.

This year's survey was conducted by Dr. Luthar and her organization, Authentic Connections, which focuses on surveying youth in high-achieving schools across the country. Dr. Luthar is a Professor of Psychology at Arizona State University and Professor Emerita at Columbia University's Teachers College. After receiving her Ph.D. from Yale University in 1990, she served on the faculty of the Department of Psychiatry and the Child Study Center at Yale.

Dr. Luthar's career includes over 30 years of research involving vulnerability and resilience among various populations including youth in poverty, children in families affected by mental illness, and teens in upper-middle class families (who reflect high rates of symptoms relative to national norms). She is also the mother of two grown children who she raised in Mamaroneck, New York.

She began her presentation with an interesting fact, "Our kids have made the top four list for at-risk youth," along with exposure to trauma and poverty as the other risks. She referenced a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation report that finds that kids in high-achieving school districts, where there is excessive pressure to perform, struggle with mental health issues at a much higher rate than national norms.

"Pelham's data looks very good compared to other [high-achieving] schools," said Dr. Luthar. "But there are some problematic areas and pressing issues," she said.

One slide in her presentation showed substance use among students in public schools, boarding schools, and independent private schools across the country.

“Pelham is significantly higher than national norms when it comes to drinking at a clinically significant level, which means drinking to inebriation six times a month,” or binge drinking.

The data shows Pelham lower than national norms on *problematic levels* of marijuana use and vaping. While overall marijuana use for Pelham students has slightly increased since 2017 to 9% of all students surveyed, the level is still significantly below national norms and levels of other high achieving schools. Vaping in general also occurs at significantly lower levels among Pelham youth than other like schools and nationally, except among our seniors. During the in-school presentation, Dr. Luthar did make mention of this among staff by stating, “you must be doing something right on this!” Pelham still must stay attuned to the number of students vaping marijuana, as that appears to be higher than norms.

The reasons students gave for substance abuse included stress, to gain or lose weight, to sleep, socialize or study, with the most frequent of these being stress and to socialize. After a question about studying from a parent in the audience, Dr. Luthar clarified that the survey questions asked about *misuse* of stimulant drugs like adderall without a doctor’s prescription.

“Overall, the data shows Pelham students with lower than national norms when it comes to anxiety, depression, and rule-breaking (stealing, cheating, lying). However, Pelham’s “hot zones” of need can be identified by breaking down the data by gender, grade, and ethnicity and analyzed “to show certain subsets of kid who we should be most worried about,” said Dr. Luthar.

Non-binary (students that identify outside the gender binary), Asian, and multi-racial students are of particular concern, showing clinically significant psychological difficulty.

The survey asked questions about students’ relationships in three dimensions — with their parents, peers, and school— and Dr. Luthar’s presentation focused on sharing the top three issues in each dimension. “So many things matter,” when it comes to the influences on our children’s behaviors and choices, Dr. Luthar said, “that we identify for Pelham the top 3 for each dimension.”

Relationships with parents

Among teen-parent relationships, the three biggest factors include drug containment (i.e. the degree to which parents set limits and enforce consequences for drug and alcohol use as perceived by their children); alienation from mom, and

mom's high expectations. When students perceive that their parents will enforce consequences for drug and alcohol use, there is a lower level of use. "Leniency has serious repercussions," Luthar said. When students feel more alienated (distant, detached) from their mom, there is a higher degree of depression and anxiety (internalizing symptoms) and a greater degree of rule-breaking and aggression (externalizing symptoms). When students feel as if mom has expectations, there is a lower degree of symptoms among our youth.

Relationships with peers

Among peer relationships, social media comparisons, particularly for girls, and bullying, particularly for boys and non-binary students, were the top issues of concern. "FOMO (fear of missing out) phenomenon is real, especially for girls," Luthar said; the higher the level of social media comparison, the higher the rate of substance use, anxiety and depression levels. The effect of bullying (as defined by outright physical threats, relational victimization such as eye rolling and social isolation, and reputational threats such as rumor-mongering) for boys in general and for our binary population specifically, also result in higher levels of all symptoms (anxiety, depression, substance use, and rule-breaking).

School Climate

In schools, bullying (in this case defined as "perception of tolerance" for bullying behaviors) and unfairness (perception that rules are not transparent and don't apply fairly to everyone) were the top issues of concern. The survey also showed that students sense a level of disconnect and tension between parents, community and the school. The greater the degree to which students perceive there to be tension among these groups, the greater the level of anxiety. "It's like living in a divorced household," Luthar said. Related to this tension is the pressure Pelham students reported feeling within their relationships with teachers. As we know, parents and teachers are the two closest adult relationships a young person has. For Pelham students, 31% reported the greatest relationship stress came from relationships with their teachers; 28% reported the greatest relationship stress came from relationships with their parents. The greater the degree of relationship stress, the greater the negative impact on student outcomes.

A final component of school climate that warrants attention is the high percentage of students who feel that there was nobody at school with whom they feel they could go to with a problem or concern—41% of students reported that they did not feel they had an adult to confide in at school.

Dr. Luthar addressed each issue and made suggestions for how Pelham parents, school administrators and the community could approach interventions. Working together with the District's Wellness Committee, School Administration, and the youth themselves, Pelham Together will use this data to formulate appropriate programs to support our youth. A full data report with survey findings and analysis will be available soon.

"I study resilience, which means doing well in spite of difficult circumstances," said Dr. Luthar. "Resilience for our kids rests fundamentally on relationships." Interventions must be collaborative and multi-pronged. With honesty, compassion, and free of judgement, Luthar assured parents and school staff that Pelham can positively address these issues.

She offered some sound advice to parents. "Our kids need to feel seen, nurtured and loved, and we need to nurture ourselves before we can give this to our kids," said Dr. Luthar. "We also need to be good role models, and emphasize kindness and decency in our competitive subculture." A continued suggestion was to involve the youth themselves in any intervention—"talk to them, ask them to participate, let older youth talk to younger youth."

"Overall, Pelham is ahead of the curve," said Dr. Luthar, but she suggested that parents and the community come together to address pressing issues, like binge drinking, and to provide resources to specific groups of students at-risk.

For more information on the survey and on Pelham Together's programs and resources, visit pelhamtogether.org. *The survey was funded and made possible by the generous support of the Pelham Civic Association.*