



# THE PRISON OF EXCELLENCE



**BY RAEGAN KNOBBE**  
Sports Editor

**T**he Cherry Creek School District is “Dedicated to Excellence,” but for many Creek students, achieving that excellence means giving up big parts of themselves, often their social lives and happiness.

Science teacher Lauren Sutton teaches all honors classes, and she sees these problems - and their consequences - firsthand.

“They’re very committed to getting high grades and doing very well and pushing themselves,” Sutton said. “But they will do that at a high cost to their mental health. A lot of times they end up staying up very late, working very hard, pushing them-

selves, and just in general feeling a lot of pressure to succeed.”

Students give up things like their sleep because they feel it is worth getting a higher grade, but it still does not always work out.

“On a certain day, they might come into class looking quite down,” Sutton said. “If they got a test score that they weren’t happy with, or they feel like isn’t representative of their best work, then they come in, and they’re upset.”

Sutton likes to see students challenge themselves by taking an honors class. Even if they do not receive the grade they hoped

for, she views it as better than a student taking an easier route for the sole purpose of getting a very high grade.

“They’re challenging themselves, perhaps not getting an A, but working really hard and learning a lot of material,” Sutton said. “But people don’t really like to see that happen, they want the high grade.”

Students argue that the grade is more important than the knowledge because, at the end of the day, a grade is what goes on your high school transcript, not necessarily an accurate evaluation of your knowledge.

“Our system is based around grades,” sophomore Giselle Mariani said. “You have to take an AP class at some point in order to get into a good college and for people to think that you’re smart.”

Junior Lorcán Boyd also feels the pressure around getting good grades, and he says it has a huge impact on how he views himself.

“When our grade drops because we can’t handle so much going on in our lives, we feel this pressure to be all-star students, because Creek is ‘dedicated to excellence’ and the top school,” Boyd said. “We have to be the best at everything, and when that doesn’t work for us, we start to fail because we’re just under so much stress. It makes us feel bad about ourselves; we feel like we’re not living up to the standard that we’ve been told we need to live up to for our whole lives.”

Outside expectations of high performance, coupled with societal views of what makes someone intelligent, cause students to feel trapped.

“I don’t have to be taking the advanced classes to be myself, like so many people have told us,” Boyd said. “It’s really more about the grades than learning.”

When students overload themselves with advanced classes, they try to cram multiple hours of work and information into very small time periods. Boyd and Mariani agree that the way they deal with this is something that takes away from their learning: memorization.

“I think school is mostly about memorizing because the only stuff I remember is when I’m actually preparing for a test,” Mariani said. “Maybe one or two units later, I’ve already forgotten everything from the past test, and I don’t really retain any information from any of it.”

Boyd says that passing is always the main concern, and learning plays sec-

ond fiddle to how well a student can utilize their memorization skills.

“When we are doing our homework, and when we’re studying, we don’t think ‘Oh I want to be learning this, I want to be educated.’ It’s just, ‘I have to do this because I have to get a good grade on the test.’ So, it isn’t necessarily learning, it’s using [the information] for the moment just to pass.”

Students feel this immense pressure to succeed, and in many cases it is because of one common reason - they feel like they must take all advanced classes to get into an elite college. Many edu-

to be in high level classes.”

Students agree that there is a huge stigma at Creek around taking advanced classes, and going to a top tier college.

“We are told that in order to be successful in life, we have to graduate from Creek with flying colors and get into the best college,” Boyd said. “And then when we get into the best college, for all four years we take the hard classes and end up with better paying jobs. I feel like most kids are told that’s the only path.”

Boyd sees the danger in students only thinking they have one path: If this notion of an elite college being the only option is why students push themselves so hard, because the other option is absolute failure, and there is no in-between.

“I do feel like students should have the desire to get good grades,” Boyd

said. “But Creek pushes it too hard on us that that’s what we have to do to succeed in life. And if we don’t, then we’re going to end up homeless on the side of the street.”

The advantages of going to a community college, such as incurring less student loan debt, get overshadowed by incorrect beliefs that people who attend community colleges are less intelligent.

“[People think that] if you go to a community college, that’s bad and you’re not smart, and you probably don’t have enough money to go to a better school,” Mariani said. “It wouldn’t be very good to go there because everyone would look down on you.”

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*junior Lorcán Boyd*

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cators and mental health professionals at Creek have had discussions about where this pressure comes from because they are concerned that it is not good for students’ mental health and learning.

“It probably comes from pressure at home, it comes from pressure from society,” Sutton said. “They’ve been told all their lives that they need to perform, and they need to go to these great schools, and they need to get scholarships to do it.”

Sutton says that because of this, kids sometimes push themselves over their limits because they do not want to be a disappointment.

“I have said to them, that if you decide to drop down to CP Biology next year as sophomores, you are still going to get an excellent education,” Sutton said. “But I still feel like a lot of them think that is a step down in some sense, or they’re going to be letting someone down, letting themselves down, or they’re not going to be living up to this stigma of ‘I’m smart, I need

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