

Choices: Teacher fears student burnout

Some parents say that's too much, too soon. The students, after all, are only 13 or 14 years old.

"I think maybe we're pushing our kids a little too early, and I'm concerned that maybe they're losing out on a portion of their childhood," said Rob Lessler, a teacher at Sutter Middle School. His 13-year-old daughter, Faye, hopes to attend HISP at McClatchy High School.

Sill, Lessler said he accepts that at students' have to work harder today. "It's a balance," he said. "We have to continue pushing, but I don't want to see 13-year-olds burn out."

There is a fear that parents and students are whipping themselves into an unnecessary frenzy over which high school to attend.

"Choosing a high school can be a big and emotional decision for students and their parents," said Lisa Stie, community outreach coordinator for the Program in America and California Explorations (PACE) at Kennedy High School, a 3-year-old program.

"But I think students who take school seriously will do well wherever they are. I think people get too nervous about choosing the 'right' high school."

Zimmerman said that for most students the choice often comes down to where their friends are

planning to go.

"I don't think you can discount that factor," she said. "Social experiences are very important. If kids aren't happy with where they are, a significant number of them will sabotage themselves by doing poorly."

Social dynamics are playing an important role for 14-year-old Katherine Carey. She hopes to go to St. Francis, an all-girls parochial school that borders east Sacramento. Carey attends Brookfield School, a small, private campus in Land Park whose 2005 graduating class will consist of eight students.

With an enrollment of about 900 students, St. Francis will be much bigger, but still more intimate than a traditional large high school, where the student body often tops 2,000.

Like scores of other middle school students, Carey recently spent a day shadowing a high school student and getting a feel for the St. Francis experience. She has filled out her application, which included an essay, academic transcripts and recommendations from teachers and a cleric. Later this month, she will take a placement test. She won't know until March whether she's been accepted.

"I'm nervous, but mostly I'm excited," Carey said.

Sutter student Faye Lessler realizes the competition to attend McClatchy's HISP will be stiff. Last year, 300 students applied for 140 freshman slots.

"I'm not at the top of my class and don't spend all my time doing extracurriculars," she said. "I'm kind of in the middle. But I don't want to go to a private school so if HISP doesn't work out, maybe I will go to Sac High."

At Mira Loma in the San Juan Unified School District, the International Baccalaureate program is an option for students in search of a rigorous academic challenge. About 600 students come from all over Sacramento and even surrounding counties for the highly regarded curriculum.

Last year, 80 students graduated with a full IB diploma, which requires passing six exams, taking a theory of knowledge course, writing an extended essay and performing 150 hours of community service. IB students attend top schools like Stanford, MIT and Harvard, said counselor Joan Adams.

As its reputation spread, "the program has grown every year," Adams said.

For some parents and students, selecting a high school goes beyond academic prestige.

On Friday morning, Sean and Lisa Trask joined their 14-year-old son, Stephen, for a tour of the Sacramento New Technology High School in Freerport Manor.

One of four new small high schools in the Sacramento City Unified School District, the campus emphasizes project-based learning and group work coupled with modern technology available to every student. The boy has struggled with learning disabilities, and the Trasks fear that he will get lost in the shuffle at a large public high school.

"We're trying to find just the right fit so he will do well," Lisa said.

In the end, the Trasks found the campus visit invaluable. The parents inspected new science labs, quizzed teachers and chatted with students while their son enjoyed a geography-language arts class.

The right school?

High schools seniors aren't the only ones under pressure to find the right school. Eighth-graders increasingly face the challenge of picking a high school that's right for them. Here's a look at some of the schools and programs available.

SCHOOL	2004	REQUIREMENTS	OPEN TO
McClatchy High School <i>Humanities and Interiors; Studies Program (HISP)</i>	300 applicants for 140 freshman slots	Application, academic transcripts, test scores, writing sample, teacher recommendations	All students through open enrollment
Kennedy High School <i>Program in America and California Explorations (PACE)</i>	210 applicants for 140 freshman slots	Application, academic transcripts, test scores, essay, teacher reference	Students in the Kennedy attendance area; 25 slots are reserved for open-enrollment applicants
Mira Loma High School <i>International Baccalaureate (IB)</i>	225 applicants for 200 freshman slots	Application, academic transcripts, participation in an honors or gifted program, test scores in the 90th percentile and above	All students through open enrollment
Christian Brothers High School	500 applicants for 285 freshman slots	Application, academic transcripts, test scores, teacher recommendations, placement test	All students
Jesuit High School	500 applicants for 280 freshman slots	Application; academic transcripts; test scores; recommendations from pastor/principal, English and math teachers; placement test; essay; interview	All students
Sacramento High School	600 applicants for 500 freshman slots	Standard application	All students through open enrollment
Sacramento New Technology High School	125 applicants for 125 freshman slots	Standard application	All students through open enrollment