

Should kids be cramming for tests or competing at sports?

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Most parents want to help their kids get ahead. But how do you that?

Should you press them to excel at academics, devote hours to sports and other extracurriculars, or get an afterschool job? Or should you dial back on such demands, to avoid causing unhealthy levels of stress?

To examine such questions—and the role that race plays in [parents'](#) answers—Tufts sociology professor Natasha Warikoo studied a high-income suburban town with a large and growing Asian American population. She calls the town Woodcrest and describes her findings in her new book, "[Race at the Top: Asian Americans and Whites in Pursuit of the American Dream in Suburban Schools.](#)"

The book uncovers differences between [immigrant parents](#) from Asia and U.S.-born white parents, as well as the tensions that those differences can fuel. But it also highlights the privileges enjoyed by all families in such high-income enclaves.

"Most [kids](#) from this town are going on to selective colleges," says Warikoo, a former high school teacher and a parent of three [school-age children](#). "That's why the book is called Race at the Top. It's like everyone's getting a medal."

Warikoo, the Lenore Stern Professor in the Social Sciences, is also author of "[Is Affirmative Action Fair?: The Myth of Equity in College Admissions](#)" and "The Diversity Bargain: And Other Dilemmas of Race, Admissions, and Meritocracy at Elite Universities."

Tufts Now recently caught up with Warikoo—herself the U.S.-born daughter of immigrants from India—to discuss race, parenting, and different models of merit and assimilation.

Tufts Now: In the wealthy suburb you call Woodcrest, all the parents you interviewed were striving to help

their children succeed. But the approaches of white, U.S.-born parents and immigrant Asian American parents tended to differ. What were the main differences?

Warikoo: The Asian parents tended to prioritize academics more. One Asian mom told me, "I told my son, "Please quit the swim team. You're not getting your homework done.'" Another immigrant Asian mom, her son really wanted to make it onto the baseball team. And she said, "I'm not going to stop him, but I won't be upset if he doesn't make it."

Why did the immigrant parents, who were mostly from India and China, emphasize academic achievement as a path to success?

It's part of what I call their cultural repertoire. Most of these immigrant Asian parents had done quite well academically in India and China, and that is what led them to be able to come to the United States, either for [graduate school](#) or college or through a highly skilled immigrant visa, and to get a high enough paying job that they could live in this town.

To get into a good college in those countries, it's exclusively about your performance on standardized tests. So in their cultural repertoire, the way to get ahead is to excel academically.

They understood that college admissions is different in the United States, so they did encourage their kids to do some extracurriculars, but the focus was the academics.

You say white parents often focused more on sports and other extracurricular activities, devoting a lot of time and money to their

children's participation. How did that affect their academic expectations?

The white parents tended to talk a lot more about balance and how they needed to balance their academics with their extracurriculars. Among them, I had multiple parents say, "We told our kids, "You can only take one AP class a semester because you're going to be really busy with your sports or with your theater come production time, and we don't want you to be overwhelmed."

Their cultural repertoire was to have a variety of different activities. It was aligned with college admissions in the United States, which looks beyond academics to your extracurriculars.

Can you say more about how the different priorities of parents line up with college admissions?

When you look at their academic outcomes in high school, Asian kids in Woodcrest were more likely to be in the top 20% of students than [white students](#) and white kids were more likely to be playing varsity sports than Asian American students, compared to their proportion in the school. Most kids are not getting recruited as athletes to colleges, but among the kids who do, white kids were more likely to be recruited athletes than Asian American kids.

But most kids from this town are going on to selective colleges, so there's not a lot of difference in terms of life outcomes. That's why the book is called "Race at the Top." It's like everyone's getting a medal. Everybody's a winner.

When concerns were raised about youth mental health in this suburb, a group of mostly white parents led a

successful push to reduce homework. On the face of it, that sounds like it might help reduce student stress—but you argue it also favors white families' desires. Could you explain that?

Most parents I interviewed were concerned about student stress and competition. The stereotype of Asian parents pushing their kids, not caring about their mental health, that's not true.

Where Asian parents and white parents differed was in their solution to the problem. Some of the Asian parents I talked to said they didn't understand this solution of reducing homework. They said things like "Every family should decide for themselves. If your kid is stressed, maybe you should not be taking so many APs or maybe you should quit sports."

Two Chinese moms both said to me, "We wish there were intramural sports." One of them had gone to the school to ask for intramural sports because it's a great way to reduce stress, it's social, and it's good exercise. She wanted a more casual way to participate. That's not how varsity sports work in the U.S. They're very intensive.

I did wonder why there's never been any talk of limits on how many hours per week coaches could require the kids be tied up in sports.

So it was mostly white parents who went to the schools and asked the administrators to change the homework policy?

Yes. I don't think it was because of animosity toward Asian Americans, but I do think it's not a coincidence that there was an alignment between

what the white parents wanted and preferred and what happened at school, because the school administrators and staff are mostly white college graduates. Their cultural repertoires were more aligned.

Before I arrived, the school had also decided to no longer name class rank. They no longer named a valedictorian. They stopped weighting GPAs, so if you take an honors class, you don't get more points toward your grade point average than if you just take the regular college prep class. That's a way to try to discourage kids from taking those advanced classes.

Some of the parents you met defended their decisions about things like taking summer vacations or signing their children up for supplementary math classes by judging other parents' choices. What do you think is behind these judgments around the 'right' way to parent?

I think part of it is that we live in this age of economic precarity. We are also in this age of intensive parenting. We feel a lot of pressure as parents to be perfect. We have all this anxiety about, "Am I doing the right thing?"

I'm not a psychologist, but I feel like there's also a little bit of defensiveness. I want to feel good about what I'm doing, but they're doing things differently and I need to reject that to feel good about the decisions that I've made, particularly when those kids are doing better academically than my kid. So some of the [white parents](#) were like, "Kids shouldn't be doing academic classes in the summer. That's not good parenting. They should be a camp counselor or get another job." Their intuitive sense of what's the right thing to be doing, what's the right way

to parent, was different from the Asian parents' perspectives.

With the immigrant Asian parents, there was much more a sense of "We do it our way. We're from another country. We do things differently" without judging others as wrong.

Sometimes the moral boundaries were among Asians, too. The U.S.-born Asian American parents would say, "We're not like the immigrant Asians" or the Indians said, "We're not like the Chinese."

Did you change your own parenting as a result of this research?

There were moments where I thought, "Am I doing the right thing for my kids?" I talk in the book about this time where I came back from a research trip and I thought, "I think my kids need to go to Russian School of Math!"

I remember looking it up and finding a center near me and I realized, "Gosh, it's two hours a week and then they have two hours of homework. There's no way I'm going to convince my kids to do this." And I didn't even try.

I'm sure if there was Russian School of Math in my town growing up, my parents would have been the first to sign me up. So I get that, but I also get wanting my kids to do sports. I can get pulled in either of these directions.

So much of what we do is influenced by what we see around us. This research gave me perspective on how this kind of rat race is so problematic. I try to remind myself that my kids are going to be OK. My kids have a lot of advantages, and my goal is for them to be their

personal best, of course, but also to use whatever advantage they have to do something good in this world. And to not stress about the details. I think most of the time I get it right, but you'll have to ask my kids for the real answer to that question!

Do you have advice for other parents?

The biggest advice that I have for parents in towns like Woodcrest is just know that probably your kid is going to be OK. Most of the things that we stress about don't matter as much as we think they do in the moment. It's hard to feel reassured when everyone is in a frenzy around you, but I try to remind myself that it's a race at the top.

More importantly, I would ask parents in towns like Woodcrest to stand up for greater resources for school districts beyond their own, so that every child has a chance to enter the game their children are in. That might, in turn, make competition in their own town less fierce.

How did the teenagers you spoke with reflect the values and expectations of their parents? Were they rebelling?

There was surprisingly little rebellion. Obviously, they don't always do what their parents ask them to do. Like one Asian American kid stayed on the swim team even though his mother thought he should quit to focus on academics. But for the most part, the kids' achievement patterns followed the pattern of what their parents' priorities were.

On the schoolwide survey, the school asked kids, "Do you feel pressure from your parents to get good grades?" Kids mostly said no. The group that expressed the highest level of agreement with that statement was the Black kids, most of whom were bussing students who didn't live in the

town. They lived in the urban center that this town is a suburb of.

When the school asked kids, "Do you feel pressure from your peers?" Asian kids expressed the highest level of pressure. If I had to hazard a guess, I think that's because they were more likely to be in honors and AP classes, where you might feel more peer pressure than if you're in the regular college prep class.

I think in a town like this, the parents don't need to pressure their kids. It's in the water. It's part of the problem of living in this economically segregated town, which is educationally segregated in terms of parents' education.

What does an unusually wealthy suburb like Woodcrest have to teach us more broadly about definitions of merit and about immigrants and assimilation in the United States?

The old ways of thinking about immigration were that, over generations, immigrants moved from the city to the inner suburb to the outer suburb and blended into the upper middle class. This was the model that was developed to explain white immigrants' trajectories over generations.

But since 1965, immigrants have been a lot more diverse. And an increasing share of immigrants move directly to the suburbs when they arrive in the U.S.—the suburbs have become ports of arrival, not necessarily a destination over generations. And because of U.S. immigration policy, a majority of Asian immigrants have a bachelor's degree, which is a higher proportion than U.S.-born residents.

Because of these trends, Asian immigrants in towns like Woodcrest tend to have high incomes and their kids often go to elite colleges and do well

academically. One in four U.S. students in the incoming class of Harvard College is Asian American, whereas the percentage of young adults who are Asian American is much smaller.

But there's not that same assimilation as, say, 50 or 60 years ago. Asians are carving a new pathway and they don't feel the need to do things the way their white neighbors are.

We need a much more nuanced way of making sense of Asian Americans, who are a minority group that is racialized and experiences racial discrimination, on the one hand, and on the other hand is doing well socially and economically.

Provided by Tufts University

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