“Work Smarter, Not Harder!” - High Achieving Perfectionists

Based on observation, about 20% of MCMS students fall in the category of “high achieving perfectionists.”  They are students who work really, really hard on all assignments and want to do their best on each and every aspect of their lives.

As teachers and parents ourselves, we are well aware of the double edge sword this presents.  On the one hand, we want our kids to do really well, and we want them to put their best foot forward.  However, we also realize that while “I put 110% into everything I do” looks great on a poster, you end up with a deficit.  And kids end up exhausted and stressed.

So here are some suggestions:

1.     Logging HW time.  Yes, it’s annoying.  But when the 7th grade did this, several students commented (without prompting) that they realized they were taking too long to do simple assignments.

2.     Time management.  Before starting HW, talk with your student about how long each task should take.  SS notes, for example, average 30-40 minutes for the entire lesson.  If they’ve started it at school, and only have once section left, that should be about 15 minutes.  If it is taking your student much longer, see if you can figure out why.  (Distractions? Doing too much work? Freezing with stress?)

4.     Project work.  “Back away from the glitter glue!”  Using one class as an example, when looking at the rubric, students knew that they could earn 25 points.  Only 6 of those points had to do with neatness, color, and visual appearance.  The remaining 19 points had to do with content.  Is your student spending hours and hours decorating a project, when appearance is only worth 6 points?  That is another important conversation to have.  Sometimes “good” is good enough.  Save “awesome” for when it is really needed (ex: science fair).

5.  Personality & stress discussions.  This one is a bit trickier.  Try to set up a loving and open conversation by stressing that they will not be in trouble for any honest answers that they give.  And then ask them,  "why do you feel the need to get 100% on everything?"  Are they feeling pressure from themselves?  From you?  From friends (competition to beat out or be as good as peers)?  From teachers?  From society?  An interesting and unfortunate trend is that the majority of these perfectionist students are girls.  Why do our girls feel they need to be perfect at school?

6.  Explain and mention times when you, the adult, are not perfect.  And that you're fine with that.  This doesn't need to be a deep "let's sit down on the couch and discuss this" (although it can be).  But it can also just be a daily mention of, "you won't believe how I messed up today" conversation.  Discuss not just the mistake and how it made you feel, but how did you got past the mistake.  They need to see that mistakes can be survived, and they actually help us grow.

We hope these simple suggestions help find balance between "overly perfect" and "still really great, but not perfect."  Middle school is the time for experimenting and examining HOW a person learns best, trying new techniques, seeing what works and what doesn’t.  And as anyone who has taught or raised more than one kid knows, every child is different!