CHALLENGE SUCCESS

STUDENT VOICE

REPORT

A review of quantitative and qualitative data from 2010-2023 examining high school students' emotional & physical health, sense of connection & belonging in school, & engagement with learning

JUNE 2024

Table of Contents

Introduction

Challenge Success, an organization affiliated with the Stanford Graduate School of Education, has been dedicated to transforming school communities to promote student well-being, engagement, and belonging for 20 years. This data report comes in the wake of the U.S. Office of the Surgeon General's December 2021 advisory calling for a renewed focus on youth mental health.

In the advisory, Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy highlighted the need for greater support for the mental and emotional health of young people, given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and other factors. Challenge Success was one of approximately 30 organizations invited to make commitments to the Surgeon General to address youth mental health.

Data from the Challenge Success-Stanford Survey of Student Experiences suggests relatively stable trends over time with regard to student belonging and engagement. It also indicates that a significant number of students struggle with adequate sleep, high levels of stress, and academic worry, all of which are detrimental to their overall well-being. This detailed analysis underscores the importance of understanding and addressing the complex dimensions of student well-being, belonging, and engagement through collaborative, equity-centered, and research-informed approaches.

Furthermore, the data elevates concern for marginalized student groups. For these students in particular, concerns related to well-being and lack of belonging may be preventing optimal academic achievement and leading to higher levels of daily stress and anxiety.

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Methodology

The findings reported here are based on survey responses collected from 2010 to 2023, which included over 270,000 high school students representing a diverse mix of students by gender, race and ethnicity, school type (public, independent, charter), and geography.

Additional qualitative data collected from student focus groups and other elicitation methods, such as "I wish" campaigns and student shadowing, offers a nuanced understanding of the current challenges and opportunities in K-12 education, painting a detailed picture of student life across demographics and school types.

Unless otherwise noted, all differences are statistically significant at p<.05.

A powerful combination: quantitative + qualitative data

- 271,000 survey responses
- 25 focus group participants
- Hundreds of "I Wish" campaigns

Summary of findings

The following insights emerge from an investigation of the quantitative and qualitative data from Challenge Success's research:

Inadequate sleep & high stress levels

Throughout the duration of the study, students consistently report insufficient sleep and high levels of stress. However, students who get more sleep report having an easier time coping with stress.

Pressure to succeed, especially for subgroups

Most students report pressure to succeed, with girls/women and gender diverse students experiencing higher pressure to perform well in school when compared to boys/men.

## Low levels of engagement & belonging

Student engagement and belonging are closely correlated with academic performance and success. Challenge Success analyzed various factors contributing to student engagement and found that students identifying as girl/woman, gender diverse, or Black show lower levels of engagement and belonging when compared to their peers. Across all populations, the majority of students are not fully engaged in their schools.

Importance of school climate & culture

This report finds that an individual school's climate and culture can have a significant impact on student experience and engagement. Key factors contributing to a positive school culture include respectful and understanding relationships between staff and students, policies that accommodate individual needs, and a general atmosphere that promotes mutual respect and encouragement.

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Conceptualizing well-being
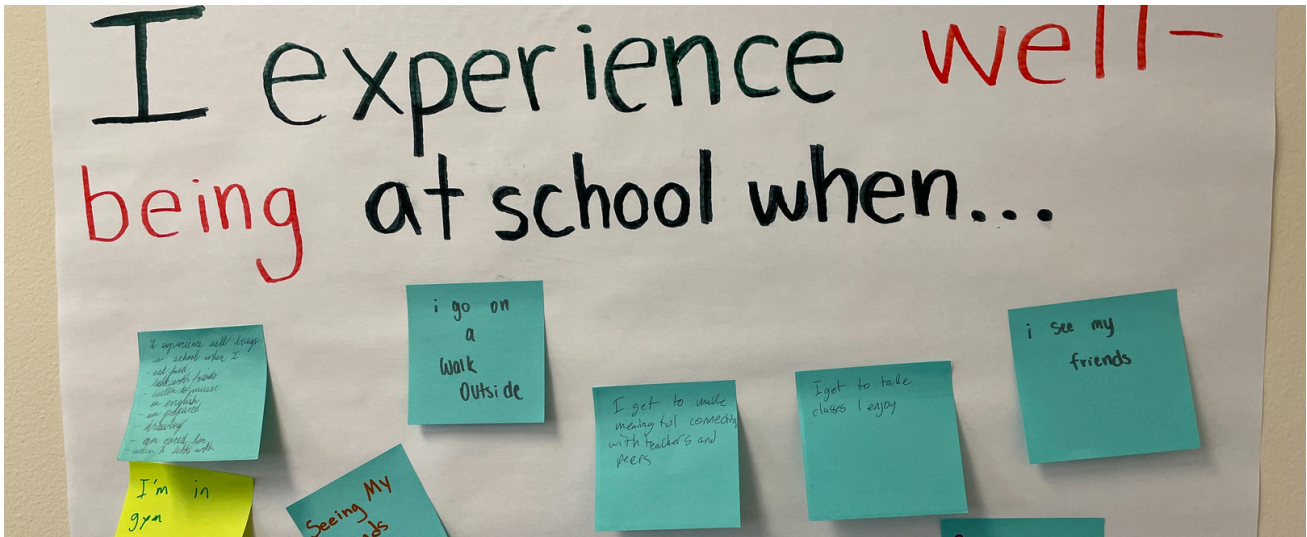
Well-being in students encompasses various dimensions, including physical health, emotional wellness, and a sense of purpose and autonomy.

Well-being is essential for effective learning and personal development, influencing students' ability to engage in academic and extracurricular activities. Research consistently shows that students with higher levels of well-being are more likely to achieve academic success, maintain better relationships, and handle the stress of school life more effectively.

Drivers of student well-being include:

• Physical health
• Emotional wellness
• Sense of purpose & autonomy

TREND: Inadequate sleep and high levels of stress

Students consistently report insufficient sleep and high stress levels, with minimal improvement over the years 2010 to 2023. On average, high school students in the study report 6.6 hours of sleep, which is significantly lower than the <u>recommended 8-10</u> hours for this age group.

6.6

average hours of sleep HS students report

8-10

recommended hours of sleep for HS students

Ability to cope with stress based on amount of sleep

As students get more hours of sleep per night, they report a greater ability to cope with stress. In addition, boys/men report a higher ability to cope with stress, on average, than girls/women and transgender/gender and non-conforming students.

■ Boy/Man ■ Girl/Woman ■ Transgender/Gender Non-conforming

To what extent are you confident in your ability to cope with stress?

Hours of Sleep
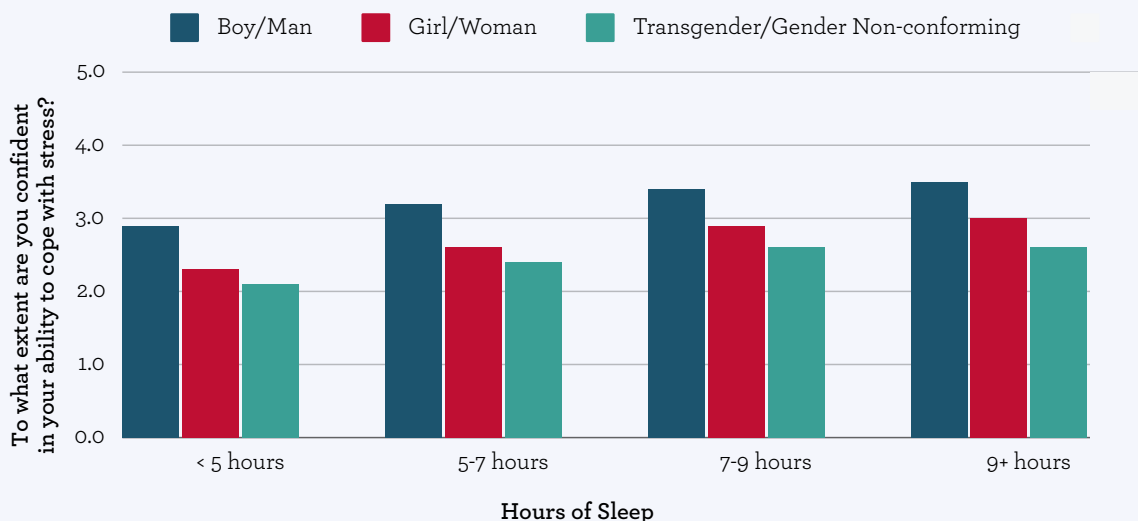
Data collected in 2021 and 2022; N=39,705. Note: Students were asked to list how much sleep they got on average during a typical school night, and they could answer on a scale from 2.5 hours to 12 hours. Students were asked how confident they were in their ability to cope with stress on a scale from 1=Not at all confident to 5= Very confident.

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TREND: Academic worry & pressure to do well in school

A predominant concern among all students is the pressure from academic workload and expectations, contributing significantly to their overall stress. Students consistently report overall workload, homework, tests/quizzes, finals, and assessments as their top sources of stress.

Elevated concern for girls/women & transgender/gender non-conforming students

Girls/women report higher pressure to do well across almost all racial category groups, and transgender/gender non-conforming students also report high levels of pressure to do well in school. On average, girls/women report higher worries about not doing well in school compared to boys/men across all racial/ethnic categories.
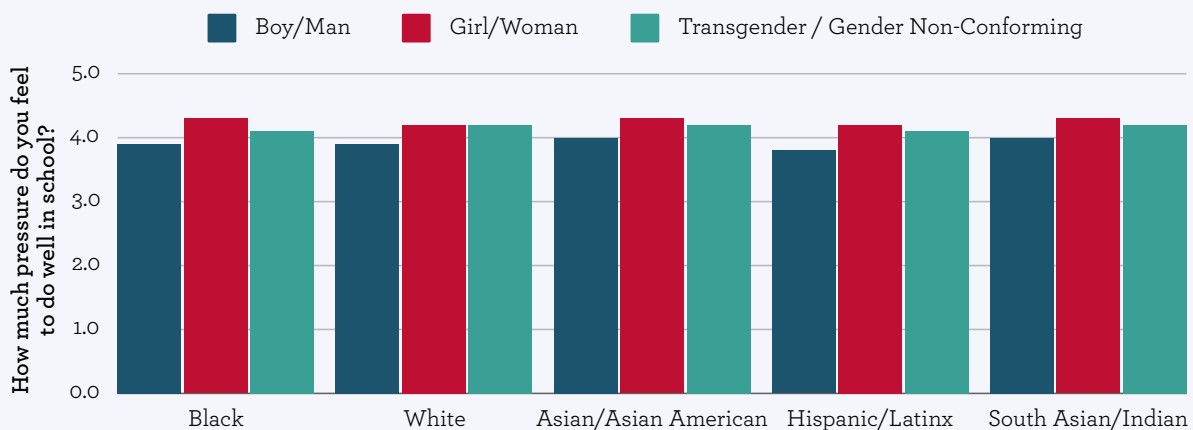
Data collected in 2021 and 2022; N=39,705. Note: Students were asked how much pressure they feel to do well in school on a scale of 1 = Never/none to 5 = Always/a lot.

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Engagement in learning

Engagement in school correlates with academic achievement for all students. However, measuring engagement is not easy. We can see how students demonstrate engagement through certain actions and behaviors, but we also need to ask about students' internal thoughts and experiences.

Often referred to as the ABCs of engagement, the measures included in the Challenge Success-Stanford Survey of School Experiences examine three dimensions of students' engagement in school (adapted from Marks, 2000). This report finds that rates of all three dimensions of engagement have been relatively stable over time.

Affective:

Students' interest in and enjoyment of schoolwork.

Behavioral:

Students' effort, hard work, and the completion of assignments.

Cognitive:

Students' attitudes toward the value and importance of their schoolwork.

Stable levels of affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement over time

Legend:
- 2010 (n=1,926)
- 2011 (n=2,390)
- 2012 (n=3,914)
- 2013 (n=6,094)
- 2014 (n=13,818)
- 2015 (n=16,915)
- 2016 (n=23,389)
- 2017 (n=29,885)
- 2018 (n=31,913)
- 2019 (n=35,270)
- 2020 (n=16,934)
- 2021 (n=22,799)
- 2022 (n=44,887)
- 2023 (n=20,866)

TREND: High levels of "doing school" & disengagement

When the three types of engagement are combined into a comprehensive measure, we can see where students are within a range of disengaged to fully engaged.

Categories include:

- Disengaged: Students who report that they are "never" or "rarely" affectively, behaviorally, or cognitively engaged (on average).

- "Doing school": Students who are "almost always" or "always" behaviorally engaged but "never" or "rarely" cognitively and affectively engaged.

- Purposefully engaged: Students who report that they are "almost always" or "always" behaviorally and cognitively engaged in school but "never" or "rarely" affectively engaged.

- Fully engaged: Students who report that they are "almost always" or "always" affectively, behaviorally, and cognitively engaged.

Drivers of student engagement:

- Sense of academic competency
- Enjoyment of learning
- Focus on student growth and mastery over achievement and pressure

> "People don't go to school to learn. They go to get good grades, which brings them to college, which brings them the high paying job, which brings them to happiness, or so they think."
>
> -Kevin Romoni, Grade 10
> *"Doing School"*

Most students are not fully engaged in their learning. On average, 13% of students report being fully engaged in school. A similar percentage of students report disengagement, while 45% of students report "doing school." Black and Latino students are less likely to report full engagement and more likely to report disengagement than South Asian/Indian and Asian students.

Furthermore, gender-diverse students are less likely to report full engagement and more likely to report disengagement than those who identify as boys/men and girls/women. Girls/women are more likely to report "doing school" than boys/men.

Always or almost always "doing school" by gender identity

■ Boy/Man　■ Girl/Woman

■ Transgender / Gender Non-Conforming

Percentage of students who are always or almost always "doing school"

Data collected 2015-2023; N=242,858.

45%
"DOING SCHOOL"
doing their schoolwork but not finding it enjoyable or valuable

13%
FULLY ENGAGED
doing their schoolwork and finding it enjoyable and valuable

Belonging

Educators have known for years that social, emotional, and cognitive processing are all neurologically intertwined, and that school connectedness has long-lasting protective effects for adolescents.

Belonging is, "an individual's experience of feeling that they are, or are likely to be, accepted and respected as a valued contributor in a specific environment." (Healy & Stroman, 2021). Research demonstrates that students do not learn as much when they feel uncertain about their belonging. When kids of all ages and stages feel like a part of their community, they are more likely to thrive.

Drivers of student belonging include:

- Connectedness, positive relationships, and social support
- Learning environments that demonstrate a climate of care
- Respect and value of each student for their individual assets, identities, and definition of success

TREND: Stable perceptions of teacher care and support over time

Overall, students' perceptions of teacher care and support remain relatively stable over time. Students generally report feeling supported by "some" to "most" of their teachers.

To create a composite score of teacher care and support (adapted from Eccles, et al., 1993), students were asked how many of their teachers:

Are willing to help students with homework	Care whether or not you come to school	Think every student can be successful
Have given up on some students	Only care about the smart students	Really care about students
Think mistakes are okay	Respect the opinions or beliefs of others even when different from their own	Value and listen to students' ideas

Mean perception of teacher care and support over time
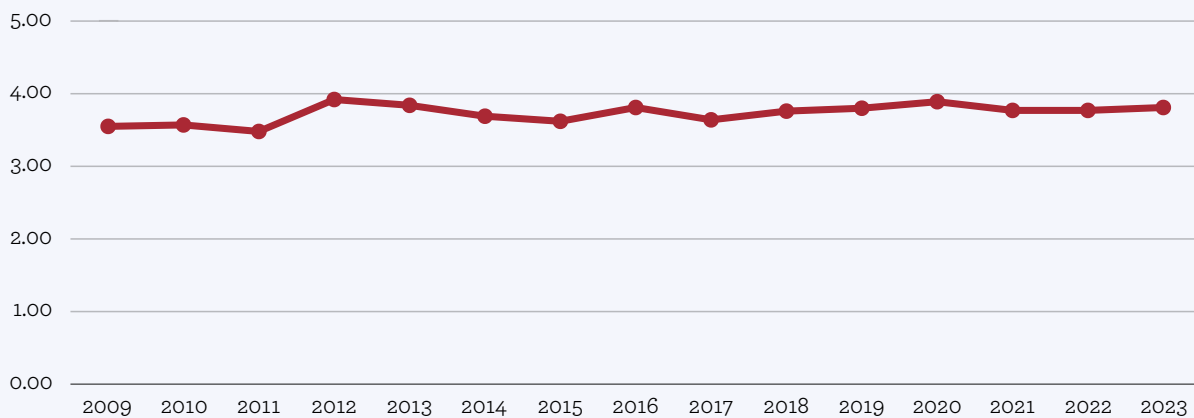
N ranges from 1,922 to 35,101 per year. Total n=184,764; 1=None of my teachers, 5=All all of my teachers

# TREND: Demographic variations in sense of belonging

While most students (70%, on average) report that they have an adult at school to go to when they have a personal problem, many students do not feel they belong at school (scale adapted from Goodenow, 1993).

In addition, students from historically marginalized groups report experiencing a lack of belonging to an even greater degree. These data indicate that students from different backgrounds experience school climate and culture in different ways and highlight a need for more inclusive school environments for all students.

- Students who identify as gender diverse report a significantly lower sense of belonging than those who identify as boys/men and girls/women.

- Students who identify as girls/women also report a significantly lower sense of belonging than those who identify as boys/men.

- Black students report a significantly lower sense of belonging most years than students of several other ethnic/racial groups.

In general, more students report having an adult to go since 2010, with a dip (on average) in 2021. There are no consistent significant differences in having an adult to go to by race and ethnicity across the years. Students who identify as gender diverse are significantly less likely to have an adult to go to with a personal problem as compared to students who identify as boys/men and girls/women.

## Mean percentage of students who have an adult at school to go to with a personal problem

N=271,000

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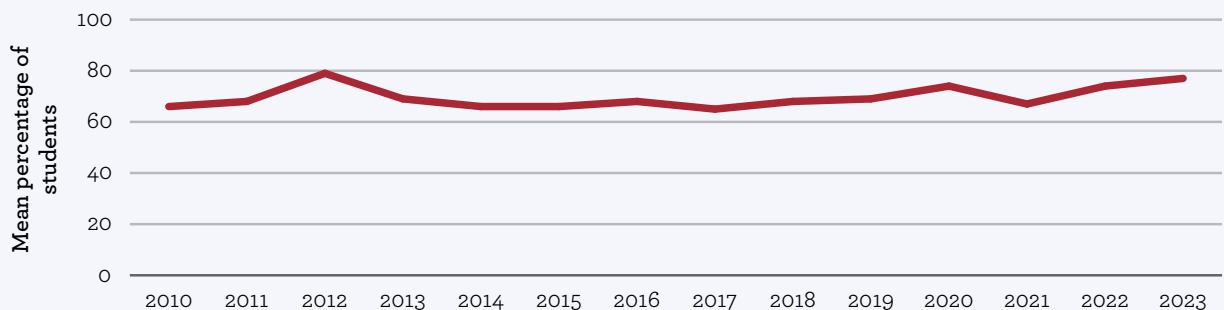
Qualitative findings

Pairing quantitative student surveys with qualitative data sharpens our understanding of issues related to student well-being and engagement and offers nuance and details that help to explain the quantitative findings. While Challenge Success employs a variety of qualitative research methods to solicit student voice, two primary protocols are highlighted in this report:

- Focus groups using a "fishbowl" protocol: The fishbowl protocol offers a unique opportunity for adults to actively listen in as a small group of students share their experiences and feelings. The facilitator asks participating students about a specific topic (e.g., stress, connection with teachers, etc.). Challenge Success conducted virtual and in-person fishbowl sessions with students from diverse communities across the United States.

- "I Wish" Campaigns: This exercise (adapted from Schwartz, 2016) offers a method for gathering student perceptions and feelings about their experiences both in and out of school. During the activity, students are asked to share their thoughts they wish adults around them knew. Challenge Success conducts this protocol with the majority of its school partners and has found consistent themes in responses over time.
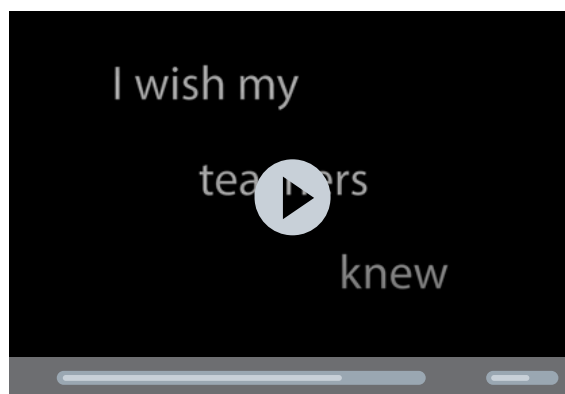
"I Wish" compilation created by Santa Margarita Catholic High School (2024).

TREND: Importance of school climate and culture

Findings from the qualitative data indicate that school culture profoundly impacts student engagement and well-being. Students report that they feel more connected and engaged when they perceive their school environment as inclusive and supportive.

Key factors contributing to a positive school culture include respectful and understanding relationships between staff and students, policies that accommodate individual needs, and a general atmosphere that promotes mutual respect and encouragement.

The qualitative data echoes research that shows that schools with a culture of inclusivity and respect are more likely to have students who report higher levels of engagement and belonging.

"I wish my teachers would allow for students to be more open and work alongside students to decide on solutions to problems that arise."

Listen in as the Challenge Success Student Advisory Council shares about student mental health in their own words (2024).
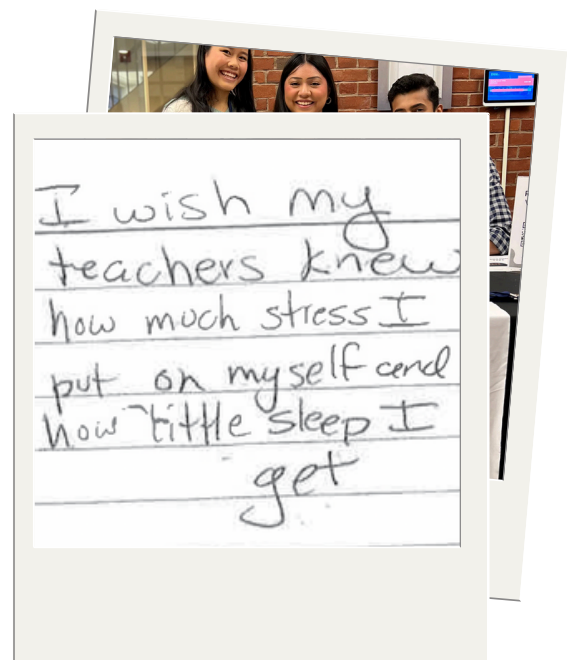
TREND: Achievement pressure from parents / caregivers

The qualitative data also reveals significant insights into the role parents and caregivers play in student well-being. Students express a desire for parents to understand the demands of modern school life.

They also express a desire for more compassion and less pressure from parents regarding academic success. The data underscores the importance of parents treating their children with respect and understanding, and providing a supportive home environment that complements the educational goals of schools.

"People have made college seem like it is the decider about how the rest of your life goes."

"I wish my parents knew how long / tiring my days are."

Listen in as the Challenge Success Student Advisory Council shares about burnout in their own words (2024).
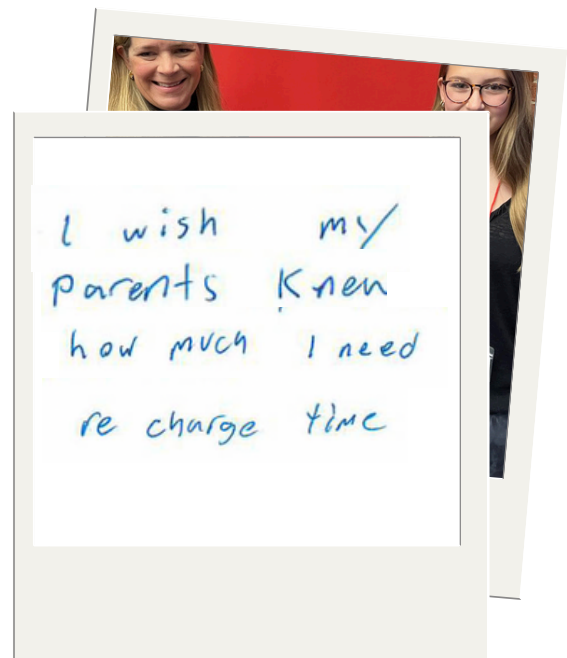
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Recommendations for future approaches

The comprehensive data collected by Challenge Success offers valuable insights into the current state of student well-being, engagement, and belonging in schools nationwide. It is evident that both home environments and school cultures play critical roles in shaping students' perceptions.

To improve student outcomes further, it is critical for schools to focus on creating supportive, inclusive, and caring climates that not only recognize the unique challenges contemporary students face, but also equip them with the necessary tools to overcome these challenges. Schools must continue to partner with families and leverage student voices to foster a sense of community that supports all aspects of student success.

The insights from the Challenge Success quantitative and qualitative research provide critical evidence of the pressing needs facing today's students. Addressing these needs through targeted prevention strategies can significantly improve students' emotional and physical health, enhance their sense of belonging, and increase their engagement in learning. Based on the findings, several approaches are recommended to enhance student well-being, engagement, and belonging.

Next steps

Schools, families, and communities must collaborate to create environments that support all dimensions of student well-being and pave the way for more fulfilling and successful educational experiences.

01

To increase well-being:

- Prioritize emotional wellness
- Support physical health
- Encourage students' sense of purpose and autonomy

02

To deepen engagement:

- Increase enjoyment of learning and motivation through relevant and meaningful experiences
- Build a strong sense of academic competency
- Shift the focus to student growth and mastery over achievement and pressure

03

To enhance belonging:

- Nurture connectedness through positive relationships and social support
- Create supportive learning environments that demonstrate a climate of care
- Respect and value each student for their individual assets, identities, and definition of success
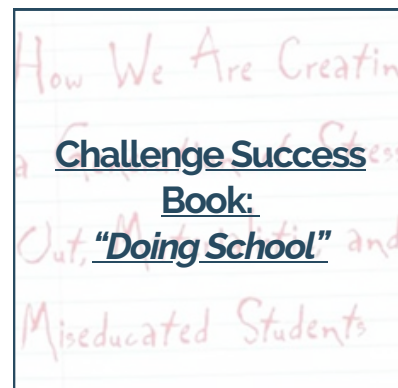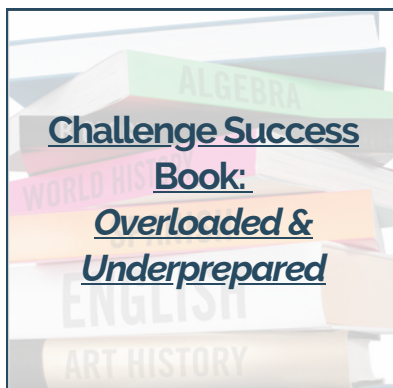
04

To learn more:

The Challenge Success website provides resources for schools and families to elevate student voice and implement research-based, equity-centered strategies to transform the student experience.

Resources

Free Challenge Success Resources for Schools & Families

Challenge Success Book: *Overloaded & Underprepared*

Challenge Success Book: *"Doing School"*

Well-Being

- How can schools support gender-diverse students' well-being? 2024.
- Making time for well-being, 2022.
- Office of the U.S. Surgeon General: Advisory on Protecting Youth Mental Health, 2021.
- Easing the stress at pressure-cooker schools, 2019.

Engagement

- Helping students to learn and grow. 2024.
- Student engagement in high-performing schools: Relationships to mental and physical health, 2014.
- Not just robo-students: Why full engagement matters and how schools can promote it, 2013.

Belonging

- What students and teachers do to build positive reciprocal relationships: A study co-led by youth and adult researchers, 2023.
- Building a caring climate that promotes belonging and engagement, 2022.
- How many teachers does it take to support a student? Examining the relationship between teacher support and adverse health outcomes in high performing, pressure-cooker high schools, 2014.

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Goodenow, C. (1993). The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates. *Psychology in the Schools,* 30(1), 79-90.

ABOUT CHALLENGE SUCCESS

MISSION

Challenge Success partners with school communities to elevate student voice and implement research-based, equity-centered strategies that improve student well-being, belonging, and engagement.

VISION

Our vision is that educational systems value each student for their unique identities, assets, and individual definition of success and effectively prepare students for the variety of opportunities and challenges they will encounter in school and beyond.

EQUITY COMMITMENT

Challenge Success continuously examines and revises our work and seeks to disrupt patterns of inequity to further well-being, belonging, and engagement for each student, especially those for whom identity, culture, or socioeconomic status has resulted in barriers to access, success, and engagement. We believe:

- Change starts with self, including active self-reflection to notice our own implicit biases and recognize how our lived experiences influence our perspectives and decision-making.
- All students, families, and communities have assets to build on and sustain.
- Centering design on those most marginalized by the current system benefits all students.
- Approaches to change must be systemic, context-based, and targeted at policies and practices.

TEAM

Challenge Success is led by a small, multidisciplinary team of educators, researchers, and youth development experts with experience in a variety of K-12 learning environments. We share a deep commitment to improving student well-being, belonging, and engagement, and a commitment to equity and access for all students. Our team embodies a learner-mindset and proactively engages in reflection in service of improving outcomes for all students.

As a 501(c)3, we are governed by a visionary volunteer Board of Directors that oversees the Strategic Plan and fiduciary health of the organization. We also draw on expertise from the community through our Student Advisory Council and a dynamic advisory council composed of educators, mental health experts, and strategy and business experts.

APPROACH

We know from our research that well-being, belonging, and engagement are intrinsically linked and are critical components of student success. Yet at the same time, our culture's emphasis on grades, test scores, and rankings often overshadows these needs, leading to unhealthy levels of stress.

AN INTERCONNECTED OPPORTUNITY

Schools have opportunities to support healthy child and adolescent development in proactive ways that promote academic success and well-being, engagement, and belonging. The good news is that because student well-being, engagement, and belonging are closely correlated, implementing policy and practice changes in any of these areas can positively impact the others.

LEVERS FOR SCHOOL CHANGE

We believe that school communities must be a place where students have positive outcomes in engagement, well-being and belonging, especially those for whom identity, culture, or socioeconomic status has resulted in barriers to access and success. To that end, we use three levers in the way we support school communities:

Center change in the student experience

Co-design with all community members

Implement research-based, equity-centered policies and practices

IMPACT

Schools and districts that implement changes to their policies and practices see lasting results that benefit countless future students. Examples of changes schools have made using our S.P.A.C.E. Framework for School Change include:

- Designing a new bell schedule
- Implementing a later start time
- Revamping an advisory program
- Implementing equitable assessment practices
- Integrating SEL practices across the school
- Creating on-campus wellness centers
- Changing conversations about college to focus on the right fit

We work with schools using a continuous improvement model so that changes are piloted, reviewed, often tested again, and then implemented. Ultimately, we see related positive outcomes for students, such as:

More sleep, reduced stress, & improved attitude towards college admissions

Increased engagement in learning & less cheating

More balance, improved sense of belonging and connection, & better teacher support

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An affiliate of the Stanford Graduate School of Education

531 Lasuen Mall
P.O. Box #20053
Stanford, CA 94309
info@challengesuccess.org