manyroads

RESEARCH REPORT · 2026

Academic Wellbeing: How Ambitious Girls Navigate Pressure and Performance

Author: ***Will Kirsop***
Research Assistant: ***Arya Singh***

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Acknowledgements

We extend our deepest gratitude to the 24 students whose participation made this research possible. Their openness, candour, and generosity in sharing their lived experiences provided the essential groundwork for this report.

We are profoundly grateful for their trust, courage, and invaluable insights.



We also thank **Lisa Chalmers**, **Dr. Reena B. Patel, Ph.D., BCBA, LEP**, and **Dr. N.A. Luxton** for their advice and expertise.

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Foreword

> What is a life well lived? The question that sits quietly beneath every conversation we have about education, achievement, and the wellbeing of young people.

We live in an era that celebrates relentless striving, curated highlights, quantified success, and a pressure to be more, achieve more, and become more. Our girls are watching. They are absorbing these messages, internalising them, and in many cases, paying a quiet and significant cost.

This research paper invites us to pause and listen to them.

What emerges from these pages is not simply a picture of academic stress or psychological strain. It is something more profound: a portrait of young women who are genuinely trying to live fully. Who are bright, ambitious, generous, and capable, but who are navigating a world that has, often, reduced their worth to a grade, a ranking, or a performance. The research documented here captures their voices with honesty and care, and in doing so, offers the opportunity to see clearly, so that we might act wisely.

The word flourishing comes from the Latin florere, to flower, to bloom. A flower does not bloom through force. It blooms when the conditions are right: when there is enough light, enough nourishment, enough space to grow toward what it was always meant to become. Flourishing, in this sense, is not the absence of challenge, it is the presence of the right conditions for a life to open fully.

What would it mean to educate for that kind of flourishing?

The strategic recommendations contained in this paper are not simply evidence-based interventions. They are, at their heart, an invitation to schools, to families, and to the young women themselves to reclaim a richer, more generous vision of what education is for. A vision where high performance and human flourishing are not competing goals, but complementary ones. Where achievement is understood not as an end in itself, but as an expression of a life being well and purposefully lived.

This is the work that matters. Not because it will produce better results (though it will) but because it will produce better lives. Whole lives. Lives marked by gratitude for the gifts each person carries, by the courage to use them fully, and by the deep and abiding joy and contentment that comes from growing into who you were always meant to be.

Lisa Chalmers

Director of Health & Wellbeing, Barker College



Executive Summary

The students represented in this report are highly ambitious, self-aware, and exceptionally driven. These student leaders, the aspiring Doctors, Division I athletes, Founders, and Film Directors of tomorrow, are positioned at the forefront of achievement and possess a remarkable capacity for self-reflection and growth. Yet, as education expectations evolve, they find themselves navigating a complex dynamic where their ambition collides with newfound systemic pressures.

The relationship between academic achievement and wellbeing has become an increasingly critical focus of educational research, particularly as high-achieving girls navigate the complex interplay of intense academic expectations, wellbeing, and systemic pressures[1,2]. Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that achievement is negatively associated with life satisfaction among female students, and that girls typically report lower levels of academic buoyancy than boys[3].

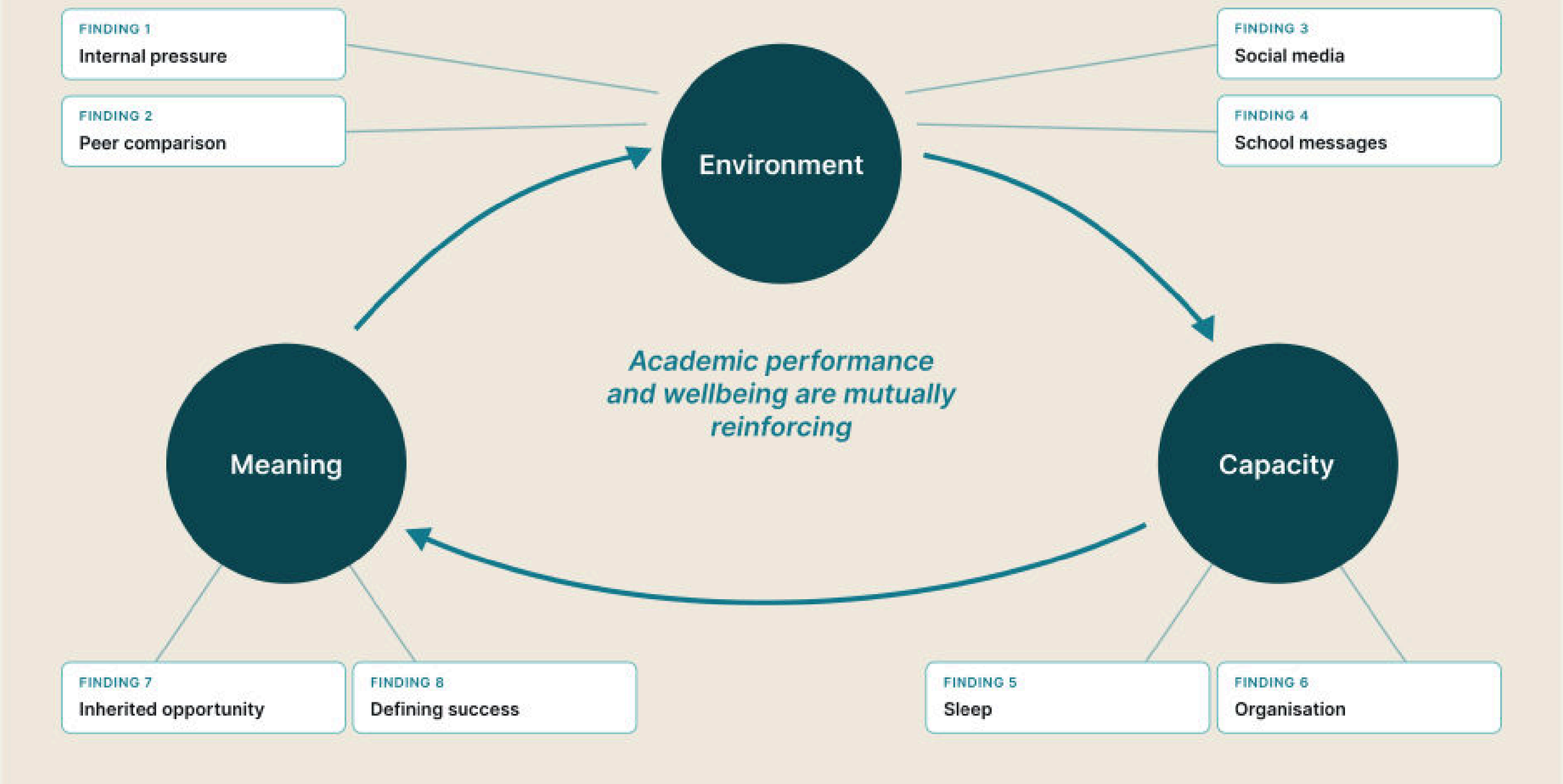
The key finding from this report is that academic achievement and wellbeing are inseparable.

Students consistently described a bidirectional relationship between academic achievement and wellbeing; academic performance affects wellbeing, while wellbeing also affects academic performance. Thus, mental health and rest provide the foundation for performance, while academic outcomes strongly influence self-worth and emotional stability.

Consequently, this report introduces the Environment-Capacity-Meaning model of academic wellbeing (Exhibit 1) grounded in a central premise: academic performance and student wellbeing are mutually reinforcing. Rather than treating wellbeing as a tool simply to manage stress or a compromise on high academic standards, this model positions it as an engine for performance. When student wellbeing is protected and nurtured, high achievement becomes truly sustainable.

Academic performance and student wellbeing are mutually reinforcing.

Exhibit 1: The Environment-Capacity-Meaning Loop



• Key Insights

By platforming the lived experiences of 24 students across Australia and the United States, three central insights emerged, one for each dimension of the model.

Environment: Pressure Is Internalised Until It Becomes Self-Imposed

Students absorb high expectations from school environments, families, and digital platforms until external demands become their own: 15 of the 24 students named themselves as the single greatest influence on their academic experience. Constant peer and social media comparison, a dominant theme in 21 of 24 interviews, further changes the meaning of success, turning personal achievement into perceived inadequacy.

Capacity: Sleep and Organisation Are Performance Catalysts

Strategic organisation and protected rest serve as high-impact levers that accelerate academic performance while protecting mental health, yet 8 of the 24 students felt effective at managing stress. Conversely, task disorganisation, time mismanagement, and reactive cramming are primary drivers of stress and sleep sacrifice, and during assessment periods, sleep is the first thing traded away. 12 of 24 students agreed or strongly agreed that academic demands negatively affect their sleep.

Meaning: Students Define Success Broadly, but Perceive a Narrower Institutional Message

Students value growth, balance, relationships and character alongside grades, yet perceive schools as recognising visible achievement above all. Many feel they have inherited not only the opportunities of previous generations of girls, but also an obligation to prove themselves across every domain. 19 of 24 students agreed or strongly agreed that expectations from society place pressure on girls to achieve.

Strategic Recommendations

To foster academic wellbeing, schools and families must move beyond individual coping mechanisms and address both systemic environments and student capabilities across three core pillars:

I

Shape the Environment Around Achievement

Explicitly teach students to distinguish between healthy, motivating stress and debilitating distress, while embedding media literacy to counter digital comparison and curated perfectionism. Additionally, incorporate students' own recommendations to reframe baseline health, including sleep, sport, and relationships, as essential performance foundations.

II

Develop the Capacity to Perform

Systematically teach executive function skills, including task breakdown, time-blocking, and workload management, while directly addressing the counterproductive 'sleep or grades' trade-off that can impair cognitive function and performance.

III

Anchor Meaning in an Internal Definition of Success

Redefine achievement around personal growth and process-orientation, actively celebrating effort and individual improvement alongside grades. Empower adolescent girls as active co-designers of school policies and mental health strategies, encouraging them to shape their own definitions of success and securely anchor their self-worth internally.



From the Founder

Day in, day out, I have the privilege and pleasure of working with students. I see young people who are deeply committed to their learning, determined to grow, and eager to find their own path in an increasingly complex world. I see students pushing themselves toward ambitious goals, figuring out who they are, and trying to make sense of what success means to them.

I also witness the challenges that sit alongside that ambition: late nights, pressure to perform, difficulty switching off, the feeling that there is always something more to do, something more to achieve, and someone else doing more; all while trying to understand themselves and their place in the world.

This research project began with a much broader scope. When Arya and I first sat down to discuss the project, we wanted to explore the challenges students experience as they navigate school, achievement, and growing expectations. As we explored the research and looked more closely at students' experiences, one theme kept emerging: the relationship between academic achievement and wellbeing in girls.

This also aligned closely with patterns I had observed through my work with students and families.

We decided to explore it further, launching this study to more deeply understand how girls experience the relationship between academic achievement and wellbeing.

The findings in this report reinforce something I have increasingly come to believe through my work with students:

academic performance and wellbeing should not be treated as competing priorities.

Wellbeing is not simply something to protect once the work is done. Sleep, organisation, relationships, confidence and a student's ability to manage their own learning can all shape how effectively they perform. At the same time, achievement can bring genuine pride, motivation, and a sense of purpose.

The challenge, then, is not to remove ambition or eliminate pressure. It is to create the conditions in which girls can pursue ambitious goals without feeling that their wellbeing has to be the price of success.

For schools, that means thinking carefully about the environments we create, the messages we send about achievement, and the skills we explicitly teach students to manage their learning. For parents, it means considering how we can provide structure, encouragement, and perspective while helping young people develop increasing ownership of their own learning and wellbeing.

This report attempts to contribute to that conversation. Most importantly, it is an opportunity to listen to the girls themselves: to understand how they experience achievement, pressure and wellbeing, and to consider what we might do differently to help them thrive.

Will Kirsop

Founder, Many Roads

Student Perspective

As the student intern on this research project, I found that taking the time to listen to girls describe their experiences—in their own words—was essential in better understanding the relationship between achievement and wellbeing.

Hearing my peers' stories was both revealing and rewarding. I heard a bit of myself in each participant and felt a kinship with them all. Each girl featured in the project is an individual with a different personality, circumstance, set of pressures, and aspirations who cannot be viewed only by their grades or achievements. It was an honor to have the opportunity to support each of the girls in sharing their experiences so that we can better understand how schools and parents can help girls succeed academically without feeling like their wellbeing comes at the cost of their success.

Academic achievement is a source of pride and motivation for most of the girls in the study. However, the pride and happiness engendered by achievement are inextricably interwoven with the pressure girls face to maintain the high standards set by themselves or the adults in their lives. Further, achievement is closely connected to comparison, peer influence, and other factors that can undermine personal wellbeing. A good academic result may bring happiness and relief, but those feelings can quickly turn into pressure for the next assessment. Similarly, recognition for doing well, while motivating, can create the feeling that there is always another level to reach. While intuitive in retrospect, I found this double-edged nature of achievement particularly striking.

What I found particularly meaningful during the interviews was how clearly the girls understood the importance of balance in their day-to-day lives. They mentioned sleep, friendships, sport, family, hobbies, and having time away from school as necessary parts of thriving. While each student's experience is nuanced, their collective perspectives indicate that wellbeing and balance appear to be key drivers of high achievement in girls. The relationship between the purposeful pursuit of balance in supporting wellbeing in high-achieving girls seems a fruitful avenue for further investigation. It's also something I intend to be more intentional about in my own life.

I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to listen to these girls and help share their experiences. I hope the perspectives shared in this report can contribute to a better understanding of how schools and parents can help girls pursue ambitious goals without feeling that their wellbeing has to come at the cost of their success.

Arya Singh
Class of 2028, Francis Parker School



Methodology

Background & Rationale

Emerging research suggests that academic achievement and wellbeing influence one another reciprocally in girls. In a longitudinal European study, girls with higher levels of subjective wellbeing subsequently achieved stronger academic outcomes; however, higher academic achievement was associated with later declines in wellbeing[1]. This tension often manifests as an "imbalance" wherein the social and internal demands of being a successful, well-rounded student conflict with the maintenance of a healthy lifestyle and psychological stability[4]. Addressing this complexity requires moving beyond traditional metrics to the lived experiences of students, as these perspectives are essential for identifying the underlying factors that contribute to school-related stress[5].

By platforming student voices, this study illuminates how external pressures are internalised by ambitious girls[6]. Systematically documenting these qualitative insights across diverse educational environments equips educators and parents with the data needed to rethink institutional policy, refine pedagogical practices, and build learning environments where high performance and human flourishing are mutually reinforcing[7,8].

Study Overview

To examine how ambitious adolescent girls navigate ambition, pressure, and wellbeing, this study employed a primary qualitative interview model contextualised by baseline descriptive survey data. Semi-structured qualitative interviews captured the core thematic insights and lived experiences of participants, while a researcher-administered survey provided contextual grounding to support narrative interpretation.

Participants

24 girls aged 14 to 18 participated in the study. Participants were recruited across high-performing independent (private) and public school environments in Australia and the United States. Each completed a researcher-administered survey and a 60-minute semi-structured interview over Zoom. Interview transcripts were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis[9]; survey data were analysed descriptively to complement the narrative findings (Exhibit 2).

Given the qualitative, purposive convenience sample, findings offer analytical insight and thematic transferability, and are not intended to be statistically generalisable.

Full details of the research design, ethical safeguards, coding framework and limitations appear in Appendix A.

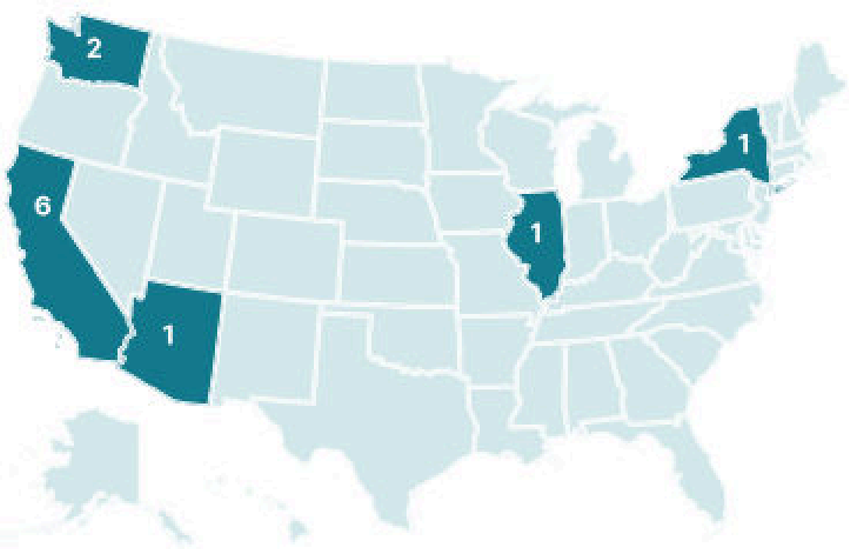
Participant Profile

24	14–18	4	2	1
girls	years old	Identify as neurodivergent	Scholarship students	Boarding student

SCHOOL TYPE

17 attend co-ed schools	7 attend girls' schools
19 attend private / independent schools	5 attend public schools

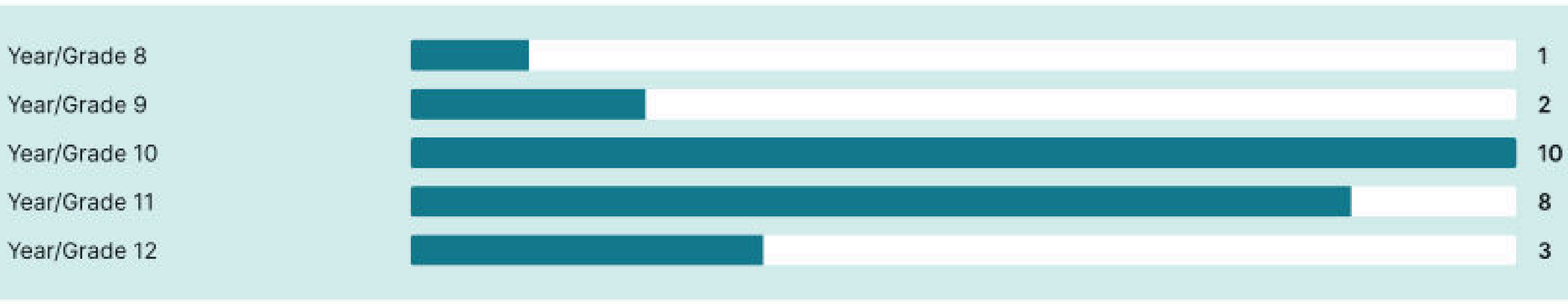
United States, 11 girls



Australia, 13 girls



Year / Grade Level of Participants (n = 24)



Grades as of October 2026.

Exhibit 2: What Is Your Approximate Academic Performance Relative to Peers at Your School? (n = 24)

Source: researcher-administered survey, 2026.

Qualitative, purposive convenience sample; findings offer analytical insight and thematic transferability and are not intended to be statistically generalisable. See Appendix A.

Notes on Terminology & Presentation

Participants and terminology

Throughout the main body of the report, participants are referred to as students. This reflects their shared context as secondary-school students and keeps the discussion focused on their experiences as learners. The term participants is retained in the methodology and appendices where it refers specifically to their role in the research.

Participant confidentiality

All participant names used throughout this report are pseudonyms. Quotations in the Findings are attributed to each pseudonym alongside the participant's grade (as of October 2026) and country; quotations in Student Voices are not attributed. Other characteristics, including school and other potentially identifying details, have been withheld to protect participant anonymity.

Language and spelling

The report uses Australian English spelling and conventions. Direct quotations from US participants retain their original spelling and language where relevant.

Key terms

The following definitions are used throughout this report to provide consistency and clarity. They are informed by established literature on student wellbeing, academic wellbeing, flourishing, and self-regulated learning, while reflecting the specific focus of this study.

Wellbeing

In this report, wellbeing refers to a multidimensional state encompassing students' psychological, cognitive, social, and physical functioning and their capacity to live healthy, fulfilling lives[10]. It includes dimensions such as sleep and physical health, emotional regulation, confidence, relationships, and the ability to manage stress and recover from periods of high demand.

Academic achievement

Academic achievement refers to students' academic outcomes and accomplishments, including grades, assessment results, academic recognition, competitions, and other markers of achievement.

Academic wellbeing

Academic wellbeing refers to the relationship between students' academic experiences and their broader wellbeing.

While academic wellbeing is a relatively emerging construct and there is not yet broad conceptual consensus regarding its definition or measurement[11], this report uses the term to describe a student's ability to pursue meaningful academic goals while maintaining the psychological, physical, social, and cognitive resources needed to sustain performance and wellbeing over time. Academic wellbeing therefore does not mean the absence of academic pressure or challenge; rather, it reflects the ability to navigate academic demands without wellbeing becoming the price of achievement.

Capacity

Capacity refers to the skills, resources, and conditions that enable students to manage academic demands and perform effectively over time. In this report, these include executive function, self-regulated learning, organisation, planning, stress management, confidence, sleep, and recovery. These factors also overlap with wellbeing, as the resources that enable students to perform sustainably can also shape how they experience and maintain their broader wellbeing[12,13].

Flourishing

Flourishing refers to a broader state of positive functioning characterised by positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment[14]. In this report, flourishing describes the possibility of pursuing ambitious goals while also experiencing broader wellbeing, connection, growth, purpose and a sense of accomplishment.



The Foundation: Academic Achievement and Wellbeing Are Inseparable

Wellbeing influences academic performance

Academic performance influences wellbeing

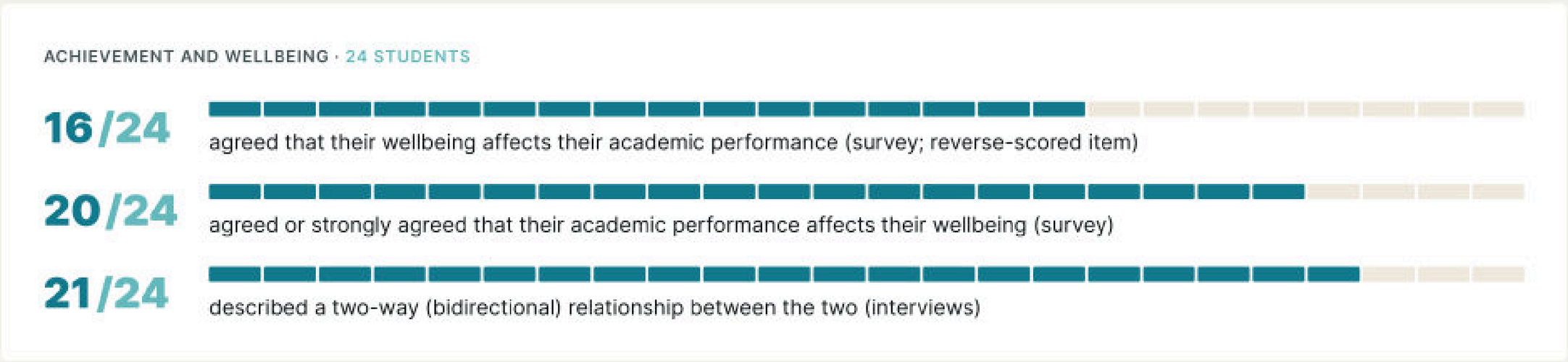
A bidirectional relationship

The trade-off between wellbeing and academic performance

Receiving exam results is a key inflection point

The Foundation: Academic Achievement and Wellbeing Are Inseparable

Students consistently described academic achievement and wellbeing as inseparable. As opposed to viewing them independently, they consistently spoke about a reciprocal, bidirectional relationship in which each continually influences the other.



One student summarised this simply:

> *"They feed off one another."*
>
> Ava, Year 10, Australia

Another explained:

> *"They impact each other a lot, just because the pressure that's put on students in school, and girls especially, is really impactful on wellbeing. The expectations of high achievement affect wellbeing and mindset."*
>
> Maya, Grade 11, USA

This pattern was also reflected in the survey findings, with 16 of 24 students agreeing that wellbeing impacts academic performance (disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the reverse-scored statement "My wellbeing does not affect my academic performance"), and 20 of 24 agreeing or strongly agreeing that academic performance affects wellbeing.

While these quantitative findings indicate a clear majority, the qualitative interviews revealed an even stronger level of consensus. Across interviews, students consistently described academic achievement and wellbeing as deeply interconnected, often speaking about the relationship spontaneously and without prompting.

Wellbeing Influences Academic Performance

Students repeatedly described wellbeing as the foundation upon which academic success is built. Sleep, emotional regulation, confidence and mental health were all seen as essential prerequisites for performing well.

As a participant explained:

> *"So much of being able to achieve is that you have to be feeling okay, you have to get enough sleep, eating right is important. Having wellbeing sets you up to be able to achieve academically."*
>
> Brooke, Grade 11, USA

Students consistently described poor wellbeing as making it harder to concentrate, study effectively, and perform under pressure. One student described poor wellbeing as: "A roadblock for yourself" and then spoke about how entering an assessment feeling calm and emotionally regulated increased both confidence and performance.

> *"Good wellbeing going into the test leads to strong academic performance, then good wellbeing coming out of the test."*
>
> Ruby, Year 9, Australia

• Academic Performance Influences Wellbeing

The relationship also exists in the opposite direction. Students consistently described academic performance as having a powerful influence on their wellbeing and sense of self.

> *"Achieving a certain mark or grade can really impact how a lot of people, especially teenagers who are probably beating themselves up about a lot of things, view themselves."*
>
> Mia, Year 11, Australia

Strong performance produced feelings of confidence, empowerment, and academic validation. Conversely, disappointing results often led to self-criticism, catastrophising, and reduced self-worth.

> *"If your academic achievement is good, that improves your wellbeing... but if you're really pushing yourself for academic achievement, that can affect your wellbeing negatively. Then after you get the results, if they're good, they make you feel better about yourself. If they're bad, they do the opposite."*
>
> Ava, Year 10, Australia

Another student described how academic performance directly influenced her emotional state:

> ***"When you do well in a test, you just feel good... you feel more empowered. If you do badly, you catastrophise a little, don't feel great about yourself... [you] definitely have less good wellbeing for at least a few days."***
>
> RUBY, YEAR 9, AUSTRALIA

Interestingly, students also described uncertainty around their academic performance as influencing wellbeing. Beyond feeling stressed only after receiving disappointing results, some spoke about the emotional significance of waiting for assessment outcomes.

> *"I don't really know how I'm going... I think I'm doing okay, then I get a C. Or I think I'm not doing well, then I do much better than I expected... that's how it affects my wellbeing."*
>
> Amelia, Year 11, Australia

A Bidirectional Relationship

Most students (21 of 24) described a bidirectional relationship in which wellbeing and academic performance continually influence one another, conscious that both positive and negative cycles can develop.

A student captured this lucidly:

> *"If you do bad in school, you feel bad about yourself, and then that makes you do worse in school. If you're feeling good, that makes you do better in school, and then that makes you feel even better."*
>
> CLAIRE, GRADE 10, USA

The Trade-Off Between Wellbeing and Academic Performance

Despite recognising that wellbeing supports academic performance, many students acknowledged deliberately sacrificing aspects of their wellbeing, particularly sleep, in pursuit of stronger academic outcomes. This was especially evident during assessment periods. Students described consciously choosing to stay up later to complete work, sacrifice sleep to prepare for assessments, postpone exercise or hobbies, and prioritise study over recovery.

Many recognised the contradiction. They knew these behaviours ultimately reduced their academic performance, yet still felt compelled to make the trade-off. Students commonly described feeling that they needed the additional hours to complete work, prepare for assessments, or meet their own academic expectations, particularly during periods of heightened academic pressure.

> *"I always forget to take care of myself when I'm locked in on school."*
>
> Claire, Grade 10, USA

This suggests that the challenge is not one of awareness. Rather, students often struggle to act on what they already know during periods of heightened academic pressure.

Receiving Exam Results Is a Key Inflection Point

Students also described the period immediately following assessment results as particularly significant.

Lower than expected academic performance did not simply affect confidence; it often influenced motivation, emotional wellbeing, and willingness to engage with further learning.

Several students explained that when they were feeling overwhelmed or disappointed academically, school became "the last thing" they wanted to think about, creating a negative cycle that made it harder to recover.

For some students, the emotional impact of receiving a disappointing result was immediate. One student described developing a strategy to avoid seeing the result herself until she felt ready to process it.

> *"I've recently started bringing the paper home with me and then looking when I get home so I don't cry at school because I find that really embarrassing."*
>
> Charlotte, Year 12, Australia

This initial disappointment, however, was rarely the end point.

Many students described a short period of emotional processing followed by a deliberate shift into reflection. One student put this transition plainly:

> *"I'll give myself a period to sulk, but honestly I'm more of a someone who looks forward. I don't really spend time dwelling on unfortunate results."*
>
> Zoe, Grade 12, USA

Once through that initial reaction, students frequently described a metacognitive process, analysing specifically what had gone wrong rather than the result itself:

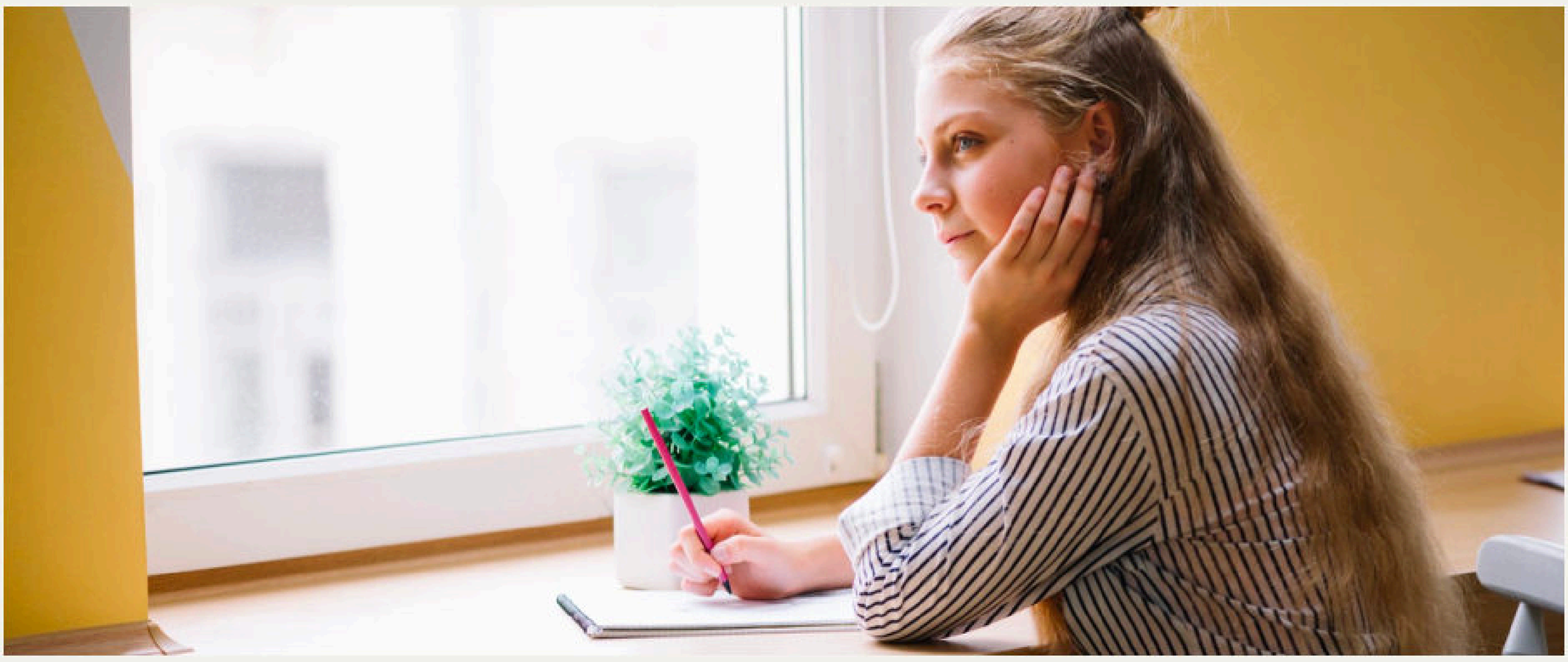
> *"I like to reflect, and I'm like, okay, what went wrong? What didn't I do?, and then I will try to do it better."*
>
> Georgia, Year 11, Australia

Another shared:

> *"Because [doing poorly] is not a normal thing, I need to figure out whether the material was hard, or I wasn't focusing as much."*
>
> Sienna, Grade 11, USA

For several students, this reflection extended into actively seeking support from teachers, treating feedback as a resource rather than a further source of judgement:

> *"I go and have a conversation with them and ask if there's anything I could do to improve next time, or if there's an opportunity to retake."*
>
> Lily, Grade 10, USA

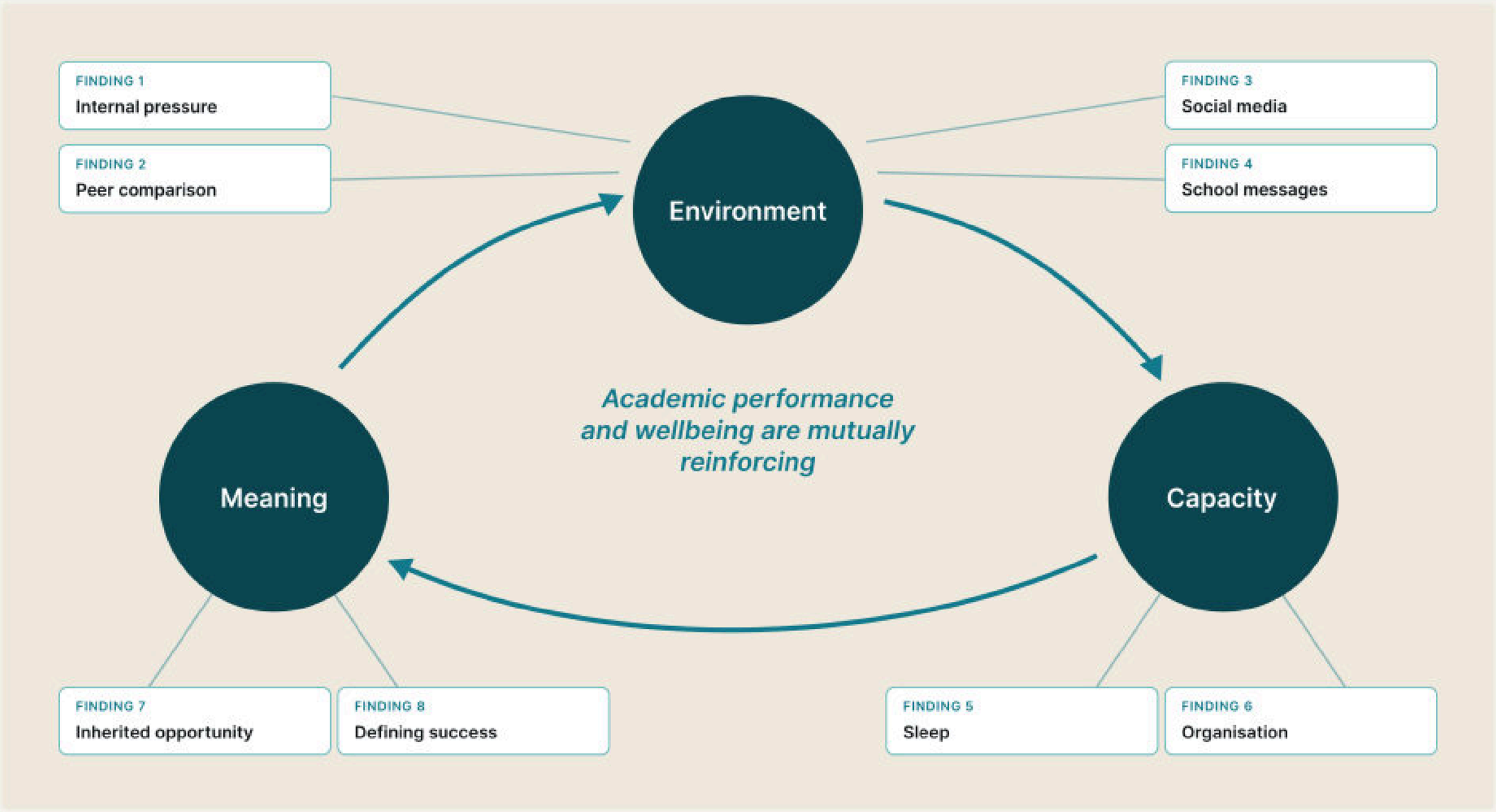


The Environment-Capacity-Meaning Model of Academic Wellbeing

Three dimensions of academic wellbeing

Across the survey and interviews, three interconnected dimensions emerged as central to how ambitious girls navigate pressure, performance, and wellbeing. Together with the bidirectional relationship described above, they form the model at the heart of this report (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1: The Environment-Capacity-Meaning Loop



I

Environment

captures the external conditions in which students are learning, including academic expectations, peer comparison, school culture and social pressures.

II

Capacity

captures the conditions that enable students to sustain performance over time, particularly sleep, organisation, and the ability to manage competing demands.

III

Meaning

captures how students understand achievement itself: the expectations they carry, the identities they develop, and the tension between their own definitions of success and what they perceive their schools to value.

Together, these dimensions suggest that academic wellbeing is not simply a matter of students learning to manage pressure. It is shaped by the environment around them, their capacity to sustain performance, and the meaning they attach to achievement. The eight findings that follow are organised by dimension: Environment (Findings 1-4), Capacity (Findings 5-6) and Meaning (Findings 7-8).

Environment: The Conditions Around Achievement

Finding 1

Pressure is experienced internally, but shaped environmentally.

Finding 2

Peer comparison changes the meaning of achievement.

Finding 3

Social media has a subliminal cost.

Finding 4

Students see schools valuing wellbeing, but feel achievement is prioritised.

Finding 1: Pressure Is Experienced Internally, but Shaped Environmentally

• Self-Imposed Pressure

Although students acknowledged that parents, teachers, peers, and social media all shaped their academic experience, the survey suggested that the greatest source of academic pressure was often themselves.

When asked to rank the five greatest influences on their academic experience (parents, teachers, friends, social media and themselves), 22 of the 24 students ranked themselves as either the greatest or second greatest influence, with 15 students identifying themselves as the single greatest influence.

22/24 ranked themselves the greatest or second greatest influence

15/24 ranked themselves the single greatest influence

SURVEY RESPONSES · 24 STUDENTS

21/24 agreed or strongly agreed that they place high academic expectations on themselves

19/24 agreed or strongly agreed that they felt pressure to achieve academically

18/24 indicated that they set very high standards for themselves (disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement "I do not set very high standards for myself")

13/24 agreed or strongly agreed that they are highly self-critical when they do not achieve the results they want

08/24 agreed or strongly agreed that they are effective at managing stress

**Disagreed or strongly disagreed with "I do not set very high standards for myself."*

> ***"Most of my academic pressure comes from myself. I'm very intrinsically motivated, and have always wanted to succeed more for myself than anybody else."***
>
> BROOKE, GRADE 11, USA

Another acknowledged it was tied to her future success:

> *"I've set this standard that I get good grades and get into a good school and play Division I sport... and once I do that, I'll be successful."*
>
> Maya, Grade 11, USA

Pressure Becomes Internalised

Although students experienced pressure as self-imposed, they described absorbing influences from parents, teachers, peers, school culture and broader social norms until those expectations became their own. Pressure was not viewed as coming from a single person or event, but as something accumulated over time.

> *"It's probably just a collection of things that I've amassed from my environment... it's from everywhere, really."*
>
> RUBY, YEAR 9, AUSTRALIA

Another explained that pressure could emerge from multiple sources simultaneously:

> *"It can sometimes be teachers, parents, friends."*
>
> Chloe, Year 10, Australia

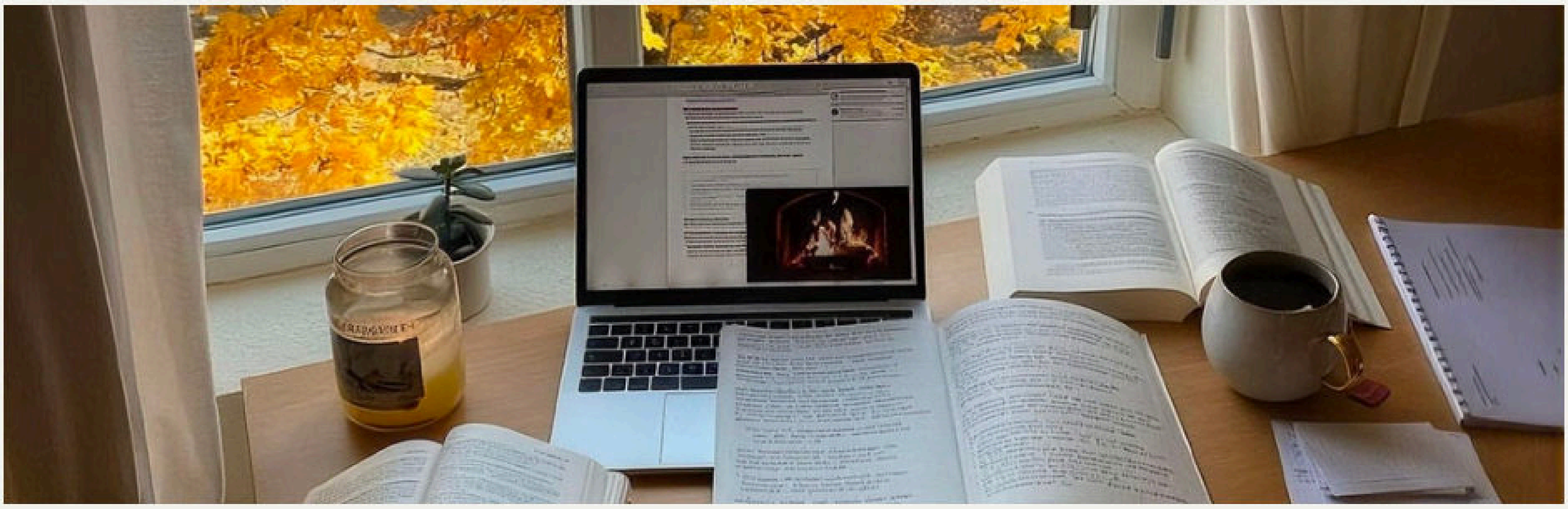
Students also recognised the role of school and community culture in shaping expectations. One participant described the environment in which she was growing up:

> *"Everyone's parents where I live are doctors, engineers, or lawyers... They have fancy jobs, and all went to really great colleges. This pressure these kids are having from their parents makes them so competitive with their classmates."*
>
> Claire, Grade 10, USA

Collectively, these accounts suggest that students do not simply experience pressure from external sources. Rather, they internalise those expectations until they become self-regulating standards that continue to operate even in the absence of explicit external pressure.

Another reflected that many of these expectations had become deeply ingrained:

> *"A lot of parents put unhealthy standards on their kids... they've been brought up in this kind of mindset that it's already internalised."*
>
> Caroline, Year 9, Australia



The Nuances of Parental Pressure

The Majority of Students Feel Supported Rather Than Pressured by Parents

Perhaps surprisingly, relatively few students described feeling intense parental pressure in their own lives. Instead, many spoke warmly about their parents' support and encouragement.

As one student explained:

> *"I have almost no pressure from my parents at all. They're really supportive of me."*
>
> Sophie, Year 12, Australia

Similarly, another reflected:

> *"Obviously my parents expect me to do well, but... there's not really any pressure coming from them."*
>
> Sienna, Grade 11, USA

Even among students who acknowledged parental expectations, many believed they ultimately placed greater pressure on themselves than their parents ever did. One participant explained:

> *"My parents put pressure on me, but I think it's more that I'm putting pressure on myself to achieve."*
>
> Maya, Grade 11, USA

Students Observed Parental Pressure More in Peers Than Themselves

Although many students reported feeling personally supported by their parents, they frequently described witnessing much stronger parental pressure among their peers.

> *"A lot of my friends can't hang out if they don't get straight A's... if they don't get a good mark, they don't want to tell their parents because their parents will get angry. Their parents always expect them to do perfectly and be number one."*
>
> Caroline, Year 9, Australia

As one participant explained:

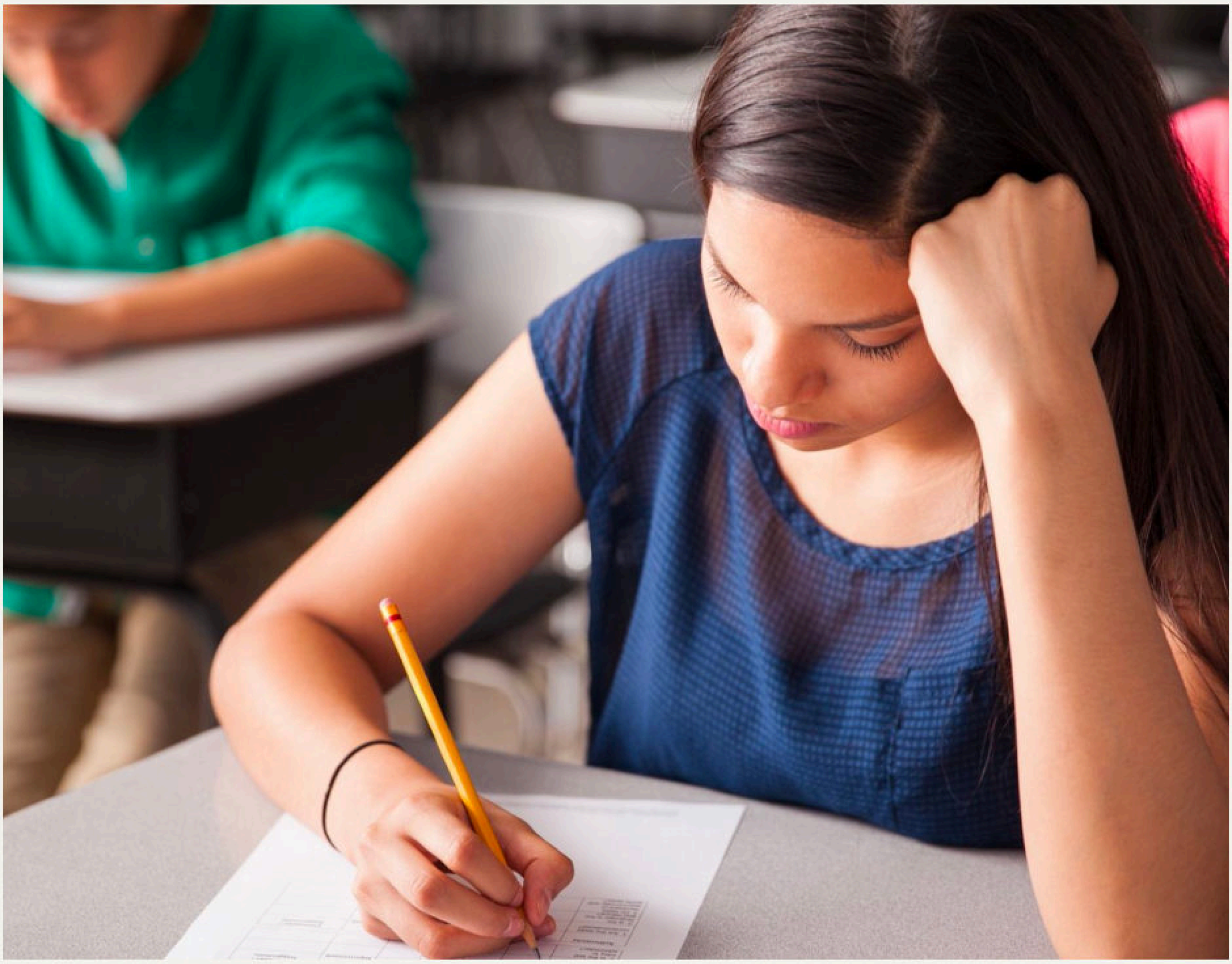
> *"I have a friend who isn't allowed to hang out with us if she has a struggling grade... I saw another friend text her family group chat after getting a bad grade saying, 'I think I might get an A- in this class... please don't freak out.' Just seeing that was enough to make me concerned for her, because I could see she might be under pressure from her family."*
>
> Zoe, Grade 12, USA

While students did not describe extensive parental pressure in their own lives, they readily identified it as a significant source of pressure for their friends. This suggests that the effects of parental pressure can extend beyond the student directly experiencing it, with several students describing the emotional burden of supporting friends who were navigating high parental expectations. In this way, parental pressure may have secondary and even tertiary effects, shaping not only individual wellbeing but also the emotional experiences of the students around them.

The Pressure of Final Examinations

Although students described academic pressure as an ongoing feature of school life, they consistently reported that it intensified during major assessment periods such as Yearly/Final examinations and Advanced Placement (AP) season.

These periods were characterised by heightened expectations, heavier workloads, and increased concern about performance. Several students described feeling emotionally exhausted by the sustained intensity of assessment blocks.



One participant reflected:

> *"I just burn myself out... dragging myself emotionally and physically just to get to the finish line."*
>
> SOPHIE, YEAR 12, AUSTRALIA

Others described the cumulative effect of multiple assessments occurring simultaneously, forcing difficult decisions about where to devote their time and energy.

Students Distinguished Between Healthy and Unhealthy Pressure

Importantly, students did not argue that pressure should be removed. In the survey, 19 of 24 students said that academic expectations motivate them to perform. Instead, they questioned the absence of guidance around where healthy pressure ends and unhealthy pressure begins.

19/24

said academic expectations motivate them to perform

As one participant explained:

> *"You want to have a certain level of pressure... but everyone experiences pressure in a different way."*
>
> Sophie, Year 12, Australia

She went on to suggest that schools should do more to explicitly teach students how to recognise unhealthy pressure:

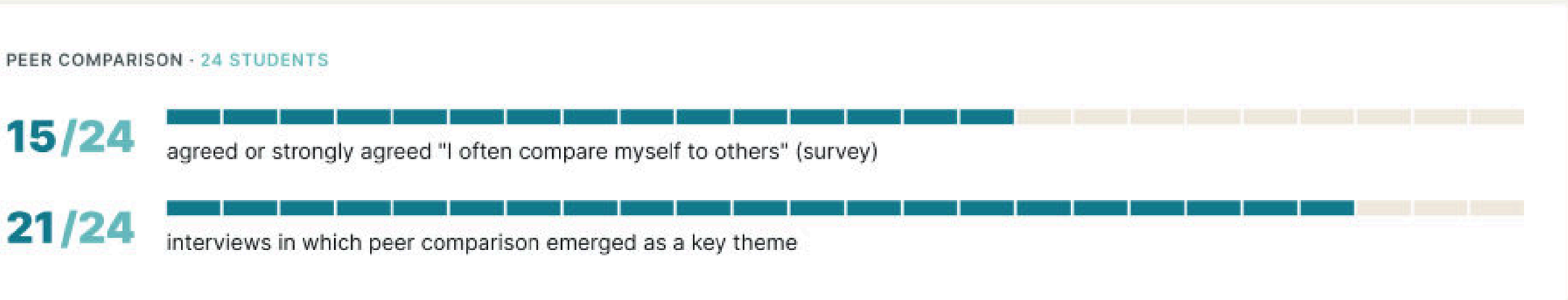
> ***"I think finding ways for the school to communicate what's a healthy amount of pressure and what's not... maybe we don't know the difference between what's good for us and what gets to a point where it's unhealthy."***
>
> SOPHIE, YEAR 12, AUSTRALIA

As opposed to calling for less academic challenge, students appeared to be asking for better support in understanding and managing the pressures that accompany academic life.



Finding 2: Peer Comparison Changes the Meaning of Achievement

In the survey, 15 of 24 participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I often compare myself to others". In the interviews, comparison emerged as a key, if not a dominant, theme in 21 of the 24 interviews. One of the clearest findings across interviews was that students rarely evaluated academic performance in isolation. Instead, achievement was almost always interpreted relative to the performance of others.



Peer comparison fundamentally changes how students experience academic achievement. In contrast to evaluating success against their own goals or progress, students consistently described interpreting achievement relative to the performance of others.

Students described comparison as degrading, demoralising and demotivating.

As one student explained:

> *"My best work is another person's average."*
>
> Chloe, Year 10, Australia

Another reflected:

> *"It's just a reminder that your maximum is someone else's minimum."*
>
> GEORGIA, YEAR 11, AUSTRALIA

These comments are particularly striking given the high-achieving nature of the cohort: even students performing at a very high level, such as the 97th percentile at their school, or receiving straight 5's on their APs in 10th grade, described their own work as less worthy when compared with the achievements of others.

Even objectively strong results frequently lost their meaning once viewed alongside someone else's performance.

One participant explained:

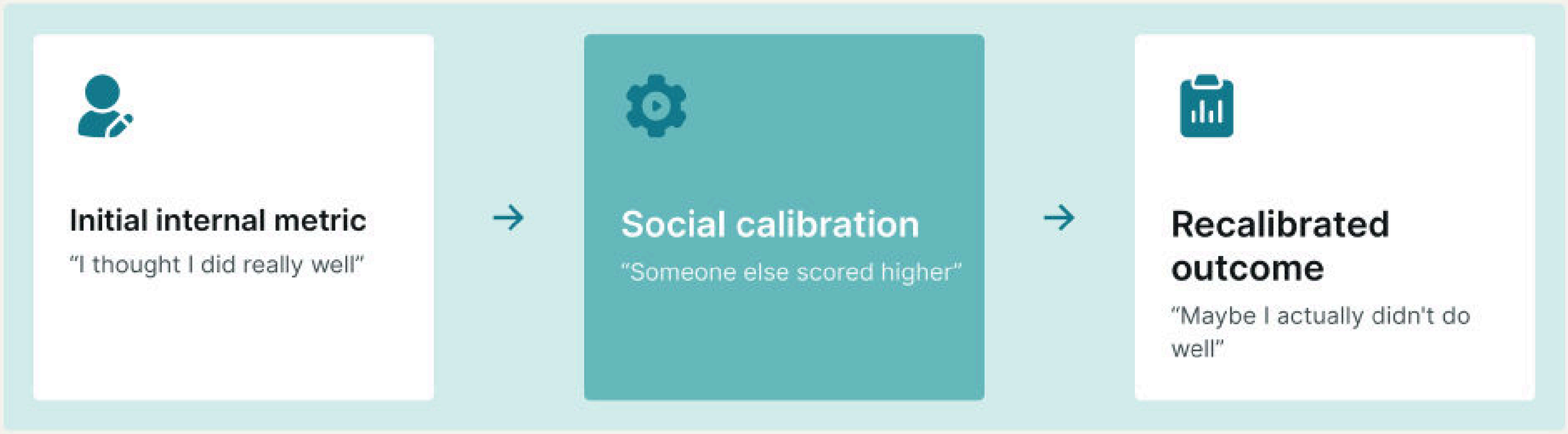
> *"I think it definitely brings me down... it makes me stressed, so it's like, 'I have to work harder, I have to be better.' I guess that motivates me, but I don't think it's good for me."*
>
> Ella, Year 8, Australia

Comparison Changes the Meaning of Success

Perhaps the most striking aspect of comparison was not that students compared themselves, but that comparison fundamentally changed how success was experienced.

Students described how the emotional nature of comparison led to a shift in internal logic: success was measured not by 'Did I do well?' but by 'Did I do better than everyone else?'

A typical sequence of comparison looked something like this:



The student's objective performance has not changed. Only the reference point has. Yet the emotional experience of success changes completely.

> *"As soon as we get back our marks, everyone's like, 'Oh, how'd you do? What'd you get?' ... Everyone wants to, like, learn what everyone else gets to see if they got the best."*
>
> Caroline, Year 9, Australia

Even tiny differences in marks were enough to transform satisfaction into disappointment. As one student reflected:

> *"If I hear someone got a 98 and I got a 97... I'll think that I should have worked harder."*
>
> Claire, Grade 10, USA

This suggests that achievement becomes socially constructed as opposed to personally defined. Success is continually recalibrated according to the performance of peers.

Students Recognise Comparison, but Struggle to Escape It

Interestingly, a number of students recognised that comparison was unhelpful. When asked what advice they would give younger girls, one of the most common responses was simply:

> *"Don't compare yourself."*

Other students described deliberately trying to redirect their attention back towards their own progress:

> *"The more I focus on myself, it just influences me to do better rather than focusing on other people."*
>
> Chloe, Year 10, Australia

Another reflected:

> *"It isn't just about grades or comparison. It's about doing the best that you can and know you're capable of."*
>
> Hannah, Year 10, Australia

Yet despite this awareness, students repeatedly acknowledged how difficult comparison was to avoid. As one student observed:

> *"The whole academic system doesn't really allow you to... compare yourself to yourself... because the ranking and everything ... is comparing you to everyone in your grade, so it's kind of hard to just focus on yourself."*
>
> Amelia, Year 11, Australia



Comparison Appears Deeply Embedded in School Culture

Students were highly aware of the cultures of their schools. While students described their schools positively using words such as inclusive, supportive, diverse, and community-oriented, one characteristic emerged repeatedly in describing schools: competitive.

> *"My school's on a lot of lists of the most competitive or cutthroat schools. Academic success is a big part of the school... a lot of students are really competitive and care a lot about their grades, which makes everything more competitive."*
>
> Sienna, Grade 11, USA

For the majority of students, this competitive culture was experienced not simply through the expectations placed on them, but through the constant awareness of how they were performing relative to those around them. Academic achievement became something to be measured not only against personal goals, but against the performance of peers.

Comparison therefore appeared to be woven into everyday academic life. Students described comparing marks after assessments, passing notes around to collect scores and manually calculate averages, discussing rankings, measuring themselves against high-achieving peers, and constantly recalibrating how well they believed they were doing based on the performance of others.

One student reflected:

> *"Self-comparison is so ingrained into basically everyone in the school. When you get a test score back, the first thing some people do is turn to each other and ask, 'What did you get?'"*
>
> Ruby, Year 9, Australia

Helping Students Navigate Comparison

Instead of suggesting comparison can or should be eliminated, a number of students recognised that it is a natural part of school life. Instead, they argued that schools should help students develop a healthier relationship with it.

As one participant explained:

> *"I don't think you can just put an absolute stop to it... it's here to stay. I think acknowledging that it's there, but just trying to make sure it doesn't get out of hand is good. When teachers are like, 'Oh, no social comparison,' it makes it the only thing you think about doing, right?*
>
> *I think having a more healthy relationship with it would be good, because it's here to stay."*
>
> Ruby, Year 9, Australia

This perspective suggests that schools may have greater success by recognising comparison as a normal part of adolescence and equipping students with strategies to engage with it in healthier, more constructive ways.

Students Who Didn't Experience Comparison

Interestingly, three students described comparison as having little influence on their own academic experience. All three attend academically high-performing public schools in the United States.

While this is far too small a sample to draw broader conclusions, their experiences provide an interesting perspective. One student explained that her school actively discouraged students from discussing marks:

> *"They keep everything super secret... you're not even supposed to tell each other. If teachers hear you talking about it, they'll say, 'Don't do that.' They're trying to keep competition down."*
>
> Brooke, Grade 11, USA

She went on to describe a school culture where recognition focused less on academic performance and more on citizenship and contribution.

Despite acknowledging motivational benefits, she reflected:

> *"I feel like it's definitely good for my mental wellbeing. I think it'd be more motivating if I knew everyone's marks, but I think it's probably good that I don't."*
>
> Brooke, Grade 11, USA

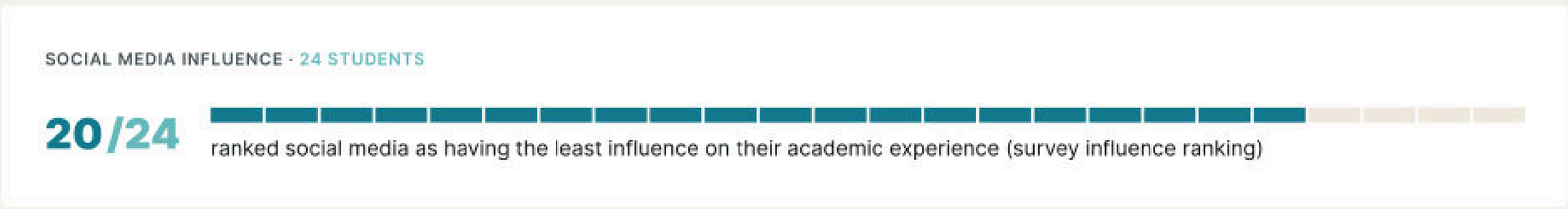
Comparison, in these accounts, does not simply reflect individual competitiveness; it also reflects the culture a school chooses to build. While students will respond differently to a given environment, school leaders have real influence over how visible and consequential comparison becomes, the norms they establish around achievement, and the structures they put in place to support wellbeing while empowering girls to reach their potential.



Finding 3: Social Media Has a Subliminal Cost

Social Media Was Viewed as Harmful

On the survey's influence ranking, 20 of 24 participants rated social media as having the least influence on their academic experience — behind parents, teachers, peers and themselves. Yet through the interviews, students consistently described it as having a negative influence on girls' wellbeing, confidence, and self-perception. Social media, in other words, was perceived to be the least influential, yet was felt deeply on a personal level.



Instead of identifying social media as a source of inspiration, students consistently described it as a source of comparison, unrealistic expectations, and pressure.

As one participant explained:

> *"Social media is constantly showing you the best version of somebody... and it makes everyone see themselves very detrimentally."*
>
> Ava, Year 10, Australia

Similarly, another reflected:

> *"I think in general, social media is a medium of comparison, where girls compare themselves to others and compare their looks and success... and I think that takes a toll on a lot of women's mental health."*
>
> Maya, Grade 11, USA

Across interviews, students repeatedly described social media as a space that encourages constant evaluation of oneself against highly curated versions of other people's lives. One student captured this particularly well:

> *"When we see all these perfect, curated moments of people's lives that don't really show anything messy or disorganized... it really impacts how people view themselves. It's this constant strive for perfection... And it's really difficult because you're hearing it from something you're supposed to watch for fun... you're constantly watching negative things, and they're all coming from everywhere."*
>
> Claire, Grade 10, USA

The Greatest Pressure Was Appearance

Although this study focused on academic achievement, students overwhelmingly described social media's influence on physical appearance, body image and self-esteem.

As one participant explained,

> *"I think it's pretty bad actually... there's a lot of beauty standards... and managing that with your academic wellbeing is hard sometimes. It's sort of like you're being pulled in two different directions."*
>
> Georgia, Year 11, Australia

Another reflected that "social media has skewed my perception of an adequate body so much" (Charlotte, Year 12, Australia), and that comparison eventually spread beyond appearance into academic life.

> *"I'm so used to comparing myself with other people that I think it's manifested into grades and people's academic performance."*
>
> Charlotte, Year 12, Australia

One student similarly described appearance as one of the biggest pressures affecting girls:

> ***"Comparing yourself to girls that you see online... affects mental health and self-esteem. It's one of the bigger things that impacts confidence with girls my age."***
>
> SOFIA, GRADE 10, USA

Across interviews, students consistently suggested that appearance-related comparison was a more pervasive consequence of social media than academic comparison itself.

• Academic Pressure Emerges Through Perfection and Comparison

Although most students believed social media had a minimal influence on their academics, several described it as normalising exceptional achievement. Instead of only comparing themselves with classmates, students noted how they compared themselves with hundreds of the highest-achieving students online. One Australian student explained:

> *"There's probably one person in your school who gets a 99.95 ATAR, but online you can find a hundred of them... Social media is trying to normalise huge success."*
>
> Mia, Year 11, Australia

Another similarly reflected:

> *"These success stories are communicated more through social media... 'I achieved a 99 ATAR'... and all these academically inclined people are communicating their success."*
>
> Sophie, Year 12, Australia

Another student observed that academic success online subtly reshaped expectations:

> *"You see all these videos of girls getting accepted into big universities, and that shapes what your definition of success is."*
>
> Ruby, Year 9, Australia

As opposed to motivating students, they felt these platforms normalised extraordinary outcomes while making ordinary achievement feel inadequate.

Social Media Is Commercialising Achievement Anxiety

Academic pressure, they suggested, has become highly personalised, with algorithms feeding students increasingly specialised content based on their existing interests. For students already focused on selective university admissions, social media quickly becomes saturated with admissions advice, application statistics and highly competitive success stories.

Several students argued that social media no longer simply displays academic success; it actively commercialises students' aspirations.

One American student described how many creators first present extraordinary admissions outcomes before directing students toward paid products, coaching or application services.

> *"They're like, 'these are my statistics as a girl going into Stanford'... and then they'll be trying to sell a course at the end."*
>
> Zoe, Grade 12, USA

In contrast with providing balanced guidance, she felt many of these accounts deliberately heightened uncertainty in order to increase engagement and encourage purchases.

> *"A lot of social media accounts... are like, 'Follow me to get the best tips... let me rate your extracurriculars,' and honestly all I think that does is make people more anxious."*
>
> Zoe, Grade 12, USA

Across the interviews, students perceived some social media accounts as profiting from their aspirations rather than providing a balanced guide to universities and colleges. Exceptional academic outcomes become marketing tools, while anxiety about university admissions is transformed into demand for coaching, courses and online advice.

Social media, in these accounts, does not merely reflect competitive educational cultures; it appears to amplify and commercialise them. For ambitious girls, the message is that they are never doing enough, and that peace of mind is something to be bought, not cultivated.



Finding 4: Students See Schools Valuing Wellbeing, but Feel Achievement Is Prioritised

In the survey, 21 of 24 students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "My school values wellbeing as much as academic achievement". Yet in the interviews, students described a strong emphasis by schools on visible achievement across multiple domains. This tension, between what the schools say they value and the definition of success students actually perceive, sits at the heart of this finding.



Across the interviews, a successful student was often perceived as someone who achieved highly academically while also accumulating leadership positions, sporting achievements, competitions, awards and extracurricular distinction. One participant explained:

> *"A successful student in my school is someone that overachieves not just in school, but out of school... sporting achievements... academic achievements... maths competitions... debating."*
>
> Chloe, Year 10, Australia

Similarly, another student described the students who stood out within her school:

> *"...the ones that achieve really high academically... straight A's... but it's also the students that are involved in all the different clubs, all the different sports... the captaincies."*
>
> Ava, Year 10, Australia

Students also observed that some schools often held a narrow definition of success. As one participant observed:

> *"The very successful people at my school only do academics... they're the people getting 98 averages."*
>
> Kavya, Grade 10, USA

Another observed:

> *"At my school, from the viewpoint of the school, it would be good grades... it's very grade-oriented."*
>
> Maya, Grade 11, USA

For the majority of students, therefore, success was communicated through a visible accumulation of achievement, both within school and in the ways achievement was publicly recognised and celebrated. Grades remained central, but were often accompanied by leadership, sport, competitions and other markers of distinction. Thus, high academic performance, leadership positions, representative sport, competitions and awards combined to create an idealised image of the "successful student."

Capacity: Sustaining Performance Over Time

Finding 5

Students know sleep matters, yet feel forced to sacrifice it.

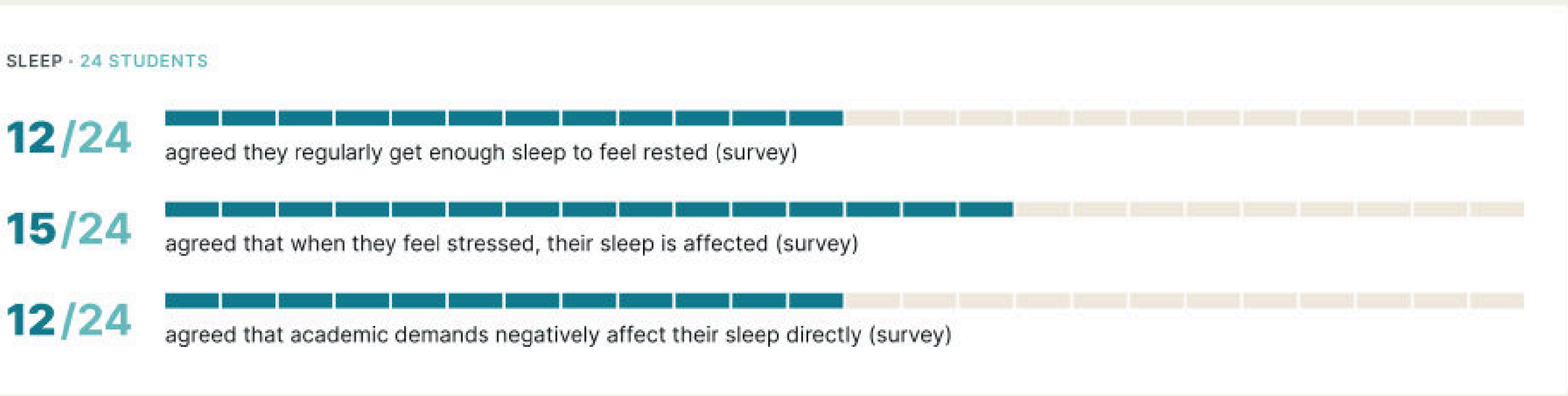
Finding 6

Organisation is the lever that lets wellbeing and achievement coexist.

Finding 5: Students Know Sleep Matters, yet Feel Forced to Sacrifice It

• Sleep Is Viewed as Essential for Success

The survey data reflects this tension: only 12 of 24 students agreed they regularly get enough sleep to feel rested, 15 of 24 agreed that when they feel stressed, their sleep is affected, and 12 of 24 agreed that academic demands negatively affect their sleep directly. Sleep, in other words, is one of the first things to give way under pressure, despite students consistently recognising its importance.



Students consistently recognised sleep as fundamental to both wellbeing and academic performance. They described sleep as improving concentration, memory, motivation, and learning as well as kindness, self-esteem and happiness. Poor sleep, on the other hand, left them feeling withdrawn, irritable, emotional and unable to perform at their best.

As one student reflected:

> *"I definitely am a lot happier and friendly when I have a good sleep. I'm nicer to myself, and I'm nicer to everyone else."*
>
> Isabelle, Year 10, Australia

Another reflected that inadequate sleep also affected her relationships and emotional wellbeing:

> *"If I don't sleep, I also get grumpy and irritable, and that affects my relationships, which therefore affects my wellbeing as well."*
>
> Caroline, Year 9, Australia

Another explained:

> *"The more sleep I get... usually the more motivated I am."*
>
> Zoe, Grade 12, USA

Students also viewed sleep as the foundation that enabled every other aspect of functioning. As a participant simply observed:

> *"Sleep is very important for all levels of performance in every capacity. Because if you're falling asleep, you can't really do anything. But if you're awake, you can learn and be present."*
>
> Elena, Grade 10, USA

Taken together, students did not describe sleep as simply helping them perform better academically.

They viewed it as a foundational behaviour that supported learning, emotional regulation, relationships and overall wellbeing.

Alongside sleep, students also pointed to nutrition and exercise as physical foundations for academic achievement.

As one student put it:

> *"I was getting enough sleep, I was eating really well, I was exercising, and I was actually getting a lot of study done... [which] led to [my] academic achievement."*
>
> MIA, YEAR 11, AUSTRALIA

Sleep, however, emerged as the dimension students discussed most consistently and in the greatest depth, and is the focus of the remainder of this section.

Students Differed in How They Prioritised Sleep

While students agreed on its importance, they varied considerably in how they responded when academic pressure increased. Some described having a clear "sleep first" philosophy. They set hard cut-off times, accepted that work would sometimes remain unfinished, and preferred to wake earlier the following morning.

> *"I don't usually stay up past 11:30 pm. If I have more work to do after 11:30 pm, then I'll go do it in my free period the next day... or figure out how to do it the next day. I think if you're tired, you're not going to perform well."*
>
> MAYA, GRADE 11, USA

Others described taking the opposite approach. During assessment periods, sleep became a commodity that could be traded for additional study time.

One participant summarised this mindset simply:

> *"I don't think I'd ever sacrifice academic success over sleep... I'd never not do a homework assignment or not study as much until I'm ready so that I can sleep longer."*
>
> SIENNA, GRADE 11, USA

Students generally agreed that sleep improved performance, but differed markedly in whether they were willing to protect it when academic demands intensified.

• Assessment Periods Fundamentally Change Students' Sleep

There was a clear pattern from the interviews on how dramatically sleep shifted during busy assessment periods. Regardless of whether students described Yearlies, Finals, or AP season, assessment periods were consistently associated with significant deterioration in both the quantity and quality of sleep.

Students described staying awake thinking about unfinished work, struggling to fall asleep because they were mentally rehearsing content, waking during the night worrying about upcoming assessments, and regularly pushing bedtimes later in order to fit everything in.

Importantly, this was not simply based on students' perceptions. One participant described monitoring her sleep using a wearable device, providing an objective illustration of how significantly assessment periods affected both the quantity and quality of her sleep (Exhibit 3).

> *"Normally my sleep score is above 90... during assessment time I slept at about 2am before an English assessment, had to wake up really early, and my sleep score dropped to 20."*
>
> Amelia, Year 11, Australia

Exhibit 3: What Assessment Periods Do to Sleep



- Bedtimes of midnight–2am were common during busy periods.
- Some students described "reverse all-nighters": bed 4–8pm, waking 11pm–3am to study.

Note: one participant's wearable data, shown as an illustration. Source: research interviews, 2026.

She noticed that assessment periods regularly caused disruption in her sleep. These changes appeared to be an expected part of assessment periods for many students.

Others described similar routines among their peers. As one reflected:

> *“I have a friend that goes to bed at like 2 or 3 in the morning during really heavy exam periods... I don't know how she does it.”*
>
> Sophie, Year 12, Australia

• The Normalisation of Late Nights

Across interviews, students repeatedly referred to studying well past midnight, particularly during assessment periods. This disruption in sleep appeared to be a normal and expected part of school life for themselves and their peers. Staying up until 1 am or 2 am, sometimes considerably later, was described by multiple students as relatively common.

As one student explained:

> *“I normally go to bed between 1 am to 2 am.”*
>
> Charlotte, Year 12, Australia

Another said:

> *"Midnight or 1 am."*
>
> Audrey, Grade 11, USA

She then went on to say:

> ***"I haven't had to pull an all-nighter for high school... yet. But, late is, like, 4 or 5 [am]."***
>
> AUDREY, GRADE 11, USA

While one student mentioned pulling an all-nighter to complete work, others described an alternative strategy of “reverse all-nighters,” going to bed early, between 4 pm and 8 pm, then waking between 11 pm and 3 am to continue studying before school.

> *“I do reverse all-nighters where I go to bed kind of early at, like, 8[pm], and then I wake up [in the middle of the night] and study.”*
>
> Charlotte, Year 12, Australia

As one participant explained:

> *“I have one friend... she goes to sleep early and then gets up at like 3 am and studies all morning until school. But some of my friends stay up until like two or three.”*
>
> Brooke, Grade 11, USA

These behaviours did not appear to be isolated experiences, yet were widely accepted among many students and were described almost matter-of-factly as part of academic life.

Students also described how their peers' study habits subtly influenced their own decisions about when to stop. A participant reflected:

> *"When we're all academically inclined, it's hard to go to bed at 10:30 when you see your friend still active [and] studying at the same time. It's like, 'Do I just keep going with them, or do I go to bed?'"*
>
> Sophie, Year 12, Australia

Instead of making decisions about sleep in isolation, students often found themselves calibrating their own routines against those of their peers. This social comparison appeared to normalise increasingly late bedtimes during busy assessment periods. This raises an important question: if students recognise sleep as essential for both wellbeing and academic performance, why do so many continue to sacrifice it?

The interviews suggest the answer may lie less in a lack of knowledge, and more in the cumulative effects of academic pressure, competition, and comparison. When students are constantly trying to keep up with, or stay ahead of, their peers, sleep often becomes the first compromise.



Finding 6: Organisation Is the Lever That Lets Wellbeing and Achievement Coexist

• Organisation Helps Wellbeing and Academic Achievement Coexist

Across interviews, students consistently described organisation and time management as the foundation that allowed academic achievement and wellbeing to coexist. Instead of viewing organisation simply as a productivity skill, students described it as something that reduced stress, increased confidence, and made it easier to maintain balance throughout the school year.

As one participant summarised:

> ***"You can have good academic achievement with good wellbeing. It's all about time management and balance."***
>
> BROOKE, GRADE 11, USA

• Organisation Creates a Sense of Control

Perhaps the strongest theme was that organisation created psychological control.

Students frequently described planners, calendars and routines not as ends in themselves, but as tools that reduced mental clutter. Rather than carrying every upcoming deadline in their heads, students found that writing tasks down allowed them to feel more relaxed and present.

As one participant explained:

> *"I have this giant planner... it helps me balance everything, so I'm not just carrying everything inside my head... A lot of people don't write things down, and then they stress themselves out because there are so many things in their head."*
>
> Kavya, Grade 10, USA

Similarly, another reflected:

> *"It makes me less stressed because I know exactly what I need to do, and when I need to do it. It helps me perform better because I know what to do first."*
>
> Claire, Grade 10, USA

Organisation Creates Balance

Students also viewed organisation as the mechanism that allowed them to maintain a life outside school. Beyond simply fitting more work into their day, planning enabled them to intentionally protect time for friends, family, hobbies, and recovery.

One student explained:

> *"Being able to block out time to study, and then having that free time as well... planning out your week so you know when you'll study and when you'll socialise."*
>
> Ella, Year 8, Australia

Another offered similar advice:

> *"Get a journal or a planner... then you know, 'I'm going to study later, but today I can have brunch with my friends.' You can stay happy."*
>
> Zoe, Grade 12, USA

Organisation was described as something that reduced stress while preserving other important aspects of life:

> *"Time management is such a big thing for me... I set reminders, make to-do lists, plan out my weekends and after-school time. It really helps me feel a lot less stressed, and it keeps me making time for other things, like seeing my friends and personal care."*
>
> Brooke, Grade 11, USA

Organisation Is Viewed as the Solution

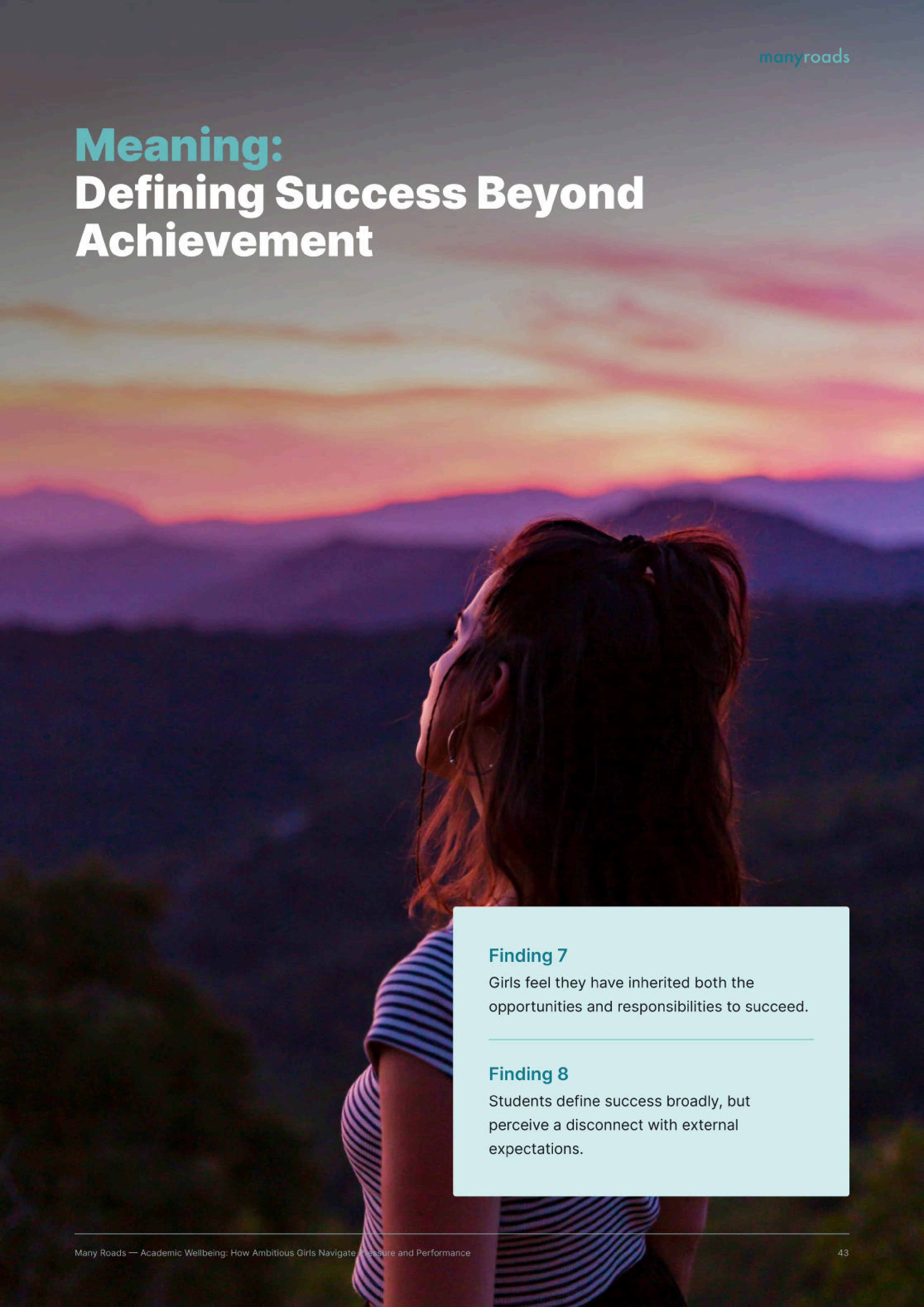
When students were asked what advice they would give younger girls hoping to succeed academically while maintaining their wellbeing, they often recommended building better systems. Whether it was using planners, journals, calendars, reminders, or structured routines, students consistently viewed organisation as one of the most practical ways to reduce stress while improving academic performance.

Crucially, structured organisation created the mental bandwidth required to protect sleep. Students who maintained clear systems typically used them to set firm boundaries, allowing them to prioritise rest and personal life as opposed to sacrificing sleep.

Zoe, a student who prioritised time management and felt it was a big part of her success, described how a clear system let her treat a set bedtime as non-negotiable:

> *"I try and go to bed as early as possible. I know that if it reaches 11 and I'm still studying, I kind of just clear it away and I'm like, tomorrow morning."*
>
> Zoe, Grade 12, USA

Meaning:
Defining Success Beyond Achievement



Finding 7

Girls feel they have inherited both the opportunities and responsibilities to succeed.

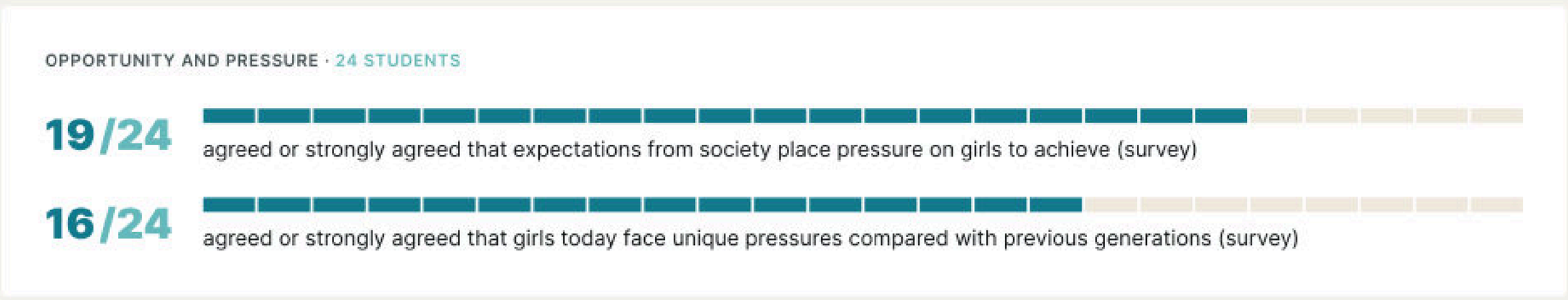
Finding 8

Students define success broadly, but perceive a disconnect with external expectations.

Finding 7: Girls Feel They Have Inherited Both the Opportunities and Responsibilities to Succeed

• Similar Opportunity, but Not Similar Pressure

In the survey, 19 of 24 girls agreed or strongly agreed that expectations from society place pressure on girls to achieve, and 16 of 24 agreed or strongly agreed that girls today face unique pressures compared with previous generations. In the interviews, most students perceived that girls today have greater opportunities to achieve than previous generations of girls, and did not describe a lack of opportunities in comparison with boys.



Many students described growing up believing girls should achieve the same level as boys, as one participant explained:

> *"I think it's more normalised to just achieve on an equal level."*
>
> Chloe, Year 10, Australia

Similarly, another reflected that she receives positive messages about achievement:

> *"There are positive messages saying you can do just as well as boys."*
>
> Amelia, Year 11, Australia

For these students, the platform to achieve was a given. However, many also believed that opportunity had brought additional pressure rather than simply a greater platform. Beyond feeling free to choose their own path, students described feeling responsible for proving themselves academically, professionally and personally. As one participant explained:

> *"We need women and girls to be great academically, do sports, be constantly fit, look perfect, be skinny... women have constantly needed to prove themselves more than guys... we need to work twice as hard to show that we earned the spot and didn't just get it."*
>
> CLAIRE, GRADE 10, USA

Another expressed a similar idea, linking current expectations to the progress made by previous generations:

> *"We feel like we have to do well to prove we deserve [the rights we've attained]... to prove all those people fighting—it was for something."*
>
> Georgia, Year 11, Australia

For these students, opportunity and obligation were therefore closely intertwined. The message that girls can achieve was sometimes accompanied by an implicit expectation that they should achieve, and achieve across multiple dimensions of life.

• Representing More Than Yourself

Several students also described feeling that their achievements represented something larger than themselves.

One participant explained:

> *"You have to achieve to be that doctor in a field that's very male-dominated... or achieve in a male-dominated sport just to be that representative of women in that area."*
>
> Ruby, Year 9, Australia

Similarly, another reflected:

> *"A lot of girls feel like they have to go above and beyond to be on par with the boys."*
>
> Mia, Year 11, Australia

Although students welcomed increased opportunities for women, some felt this also created an expectation to continually demonstrate capability.

• Help Girls Define Success for Themselves

Students repeatedly argued that schools and families should avoid presenting success as a single pathway.

As one explained:

> ***"Success is different for everyone... helping women find their own definition of success and what they want to do with their life would be a lot healthier."***
>
> MAYA, GRADE 11, USA

Schools could better support wellbeing by helping students develop personally meaningful definitions of success.

Finding 8: Students Define Success Broadly, but Perceive a Disconnect with External Expectations

Success Is Multidimensional

When students were asked what success meant, they described it as a multidimensional concept encompassing learning, relationships, extracurricular involvement, sport, wellbeing and personal fulfilment. As one student explained:

> *"I think it's a combination of doing well in many aspects... whether that's academic or sport-related or language arts-related."*
>
> Caroline, Year 9, Australia

Similarly, another reflected that success meant:

> *"Doing it all... doing well academically, doing well with sports, doing well socially."*
>
> Nina, Grade 11, USA

For many, success also involved maintaining healthy relationships and balance. One participant described success as:

> *"Getting good grades... but also having good relationships with your teachers and friends, and balancing schoolwork with your personal life and your hobbies."*
>
> Sienna, Grade 11, USA

Across interviews, students consistently returned to balance, relationships, confidence and personal fulfilment as important components of a successful life.

Grades Remain the Dominant Measure

Despite these broader conceptions of success, academic performance almost always emerged first in students' responses. Good grades remained the primary marker of success, particularly within school environments. Students recognised that grades often shaped opportunities, university pathways and how success was perceived by others.

As one participant reflected:

> *"The first thing that comes to mind is definitely grades."*
>
> Zoe, Grade 12, USA

Students therefore did not view academic achievement as opposed to success or wellbeing. Rather, academic achievement was an important part of success, but not the only part. For many, the ideal was to achieve strong academic outcomes while also maintaining the relationships, interests, wellbeing and personal fulfilment that made those achievements meaningful.

Success Is Also About Learning and Growth

Alongside grades, several students described success in terms of understanding, improvement and personal growth. For these students, the outcome mattered, but so did what they had learned and how they had developed along the way.

One participant explained:

> *"Success... means how much I understand content... and how well I can understand things and apply my learning."*
>
> Chloe, Year 10, Australia

As one student reflected:

> *"Success means achieving good grades, constantly improving, and being proud of your growth."*
>
> Ava, Year 10, Australia

Another described the importance of being able to recognise areas for improvement while still feeling satisfied with their progress:

> *"Being happy with the result you got, but also being able to see an area that needs improving... there's always something you can do better... which is a place where you can grow, but still feel happy with where you're at."*
>
> Ella, Year 8, Australia

This suggests that students' definitions of success were an attempt to place academic achievement within a broader conception of improvement, growth, and fulfilment.

Success Encompasses Character, Achievement, and Fulfilment

While students placed considerable value on academic achievement, many also described success in terms of the person they become and the life they build alongside their achievements. Character, relationships, contribution, confidence and personal fulfilment all emerged as important parts of what it means to be successful.

One participant described a successful student as someone who:

> ***"Can genuinely interact with other people, is really nice and helpful and outgoing, does some extracurriculars, and is just a passionate, kind person."***
>
> CLAIRE, GRADE 10, USA

Another reflected:

> *"There shouldn't be one standard you have to achieve... grades shouldn't define you. It should come down to your character and your treatment of other people."*
>
> Anika, Year 10, Australia

Others similarly described success as being able to pursue academic goals while maintaining the relationships, interests and activities that matter to them:

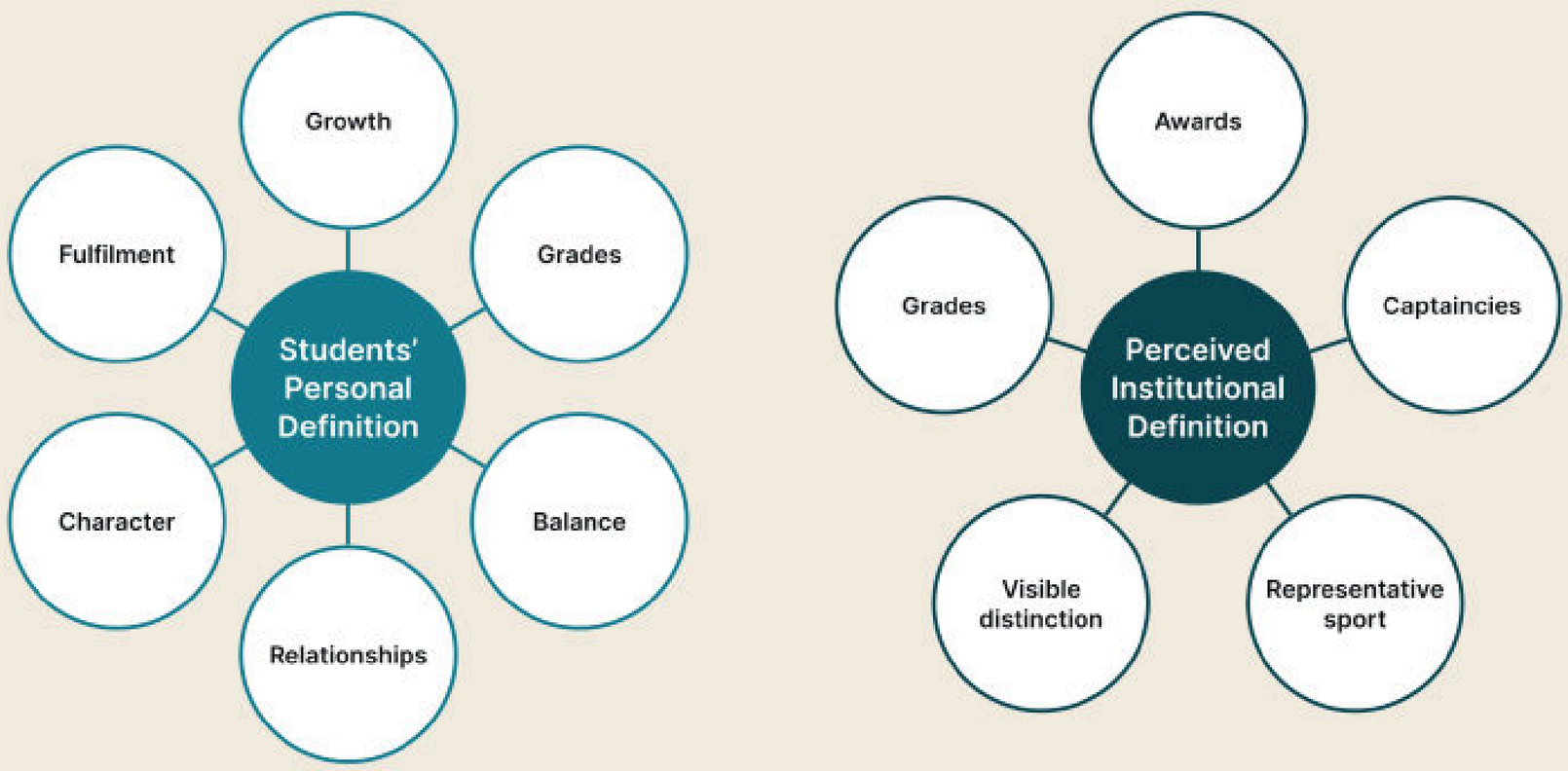
> *"Doing well academically... whilst having a good balance with seeing friends, playing sport, getting exercise and doing something they enjoy."*
>
> Mia, Year 11, Australia

For these students, academic achievement remained an important part of success, but not its entirety. The broader aspiration was not to reject achievement, but to place it within a life that also allows for relationships, interests, wellbeing, confidence and personal fulfilment.

Navigating Two Definitions of Success

Across the interviews, students appeared to be navigating two parallel definitions of success. Personally, they valued grades, balance, learning, relationships, wellbeing, character and personal growth. Institutionally, however, they perceived schools to recognise academic performance and other visible markers of achievement, such as awards, leadership, sport and extracurricular distinction (Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 4: Students' Personal Definition and Perceived Institutional Definition



Source: research interviews, 2026.

The tension across the interviews was therefore not between academic achievement and a broader definition of success. Students generally valued both: many were trying to work out how to achieve highly without allowing achievement to crowd out the other things they considered important.

One student reflected thoughtfully on this trade-off:

> *"I think success will always, at school, have something to do with doing well academically, because it means you can get into better universities with a better ATAR. But I also think success means feeling fulfilled in yourself, and so doing things you love, and even if that means sacrificing a little bit of your academics. I sacrificed a little bit of my academics for things like debating, and I think that I'll always look back and find that I was more successful in upholding my wellbeing and upholding my interests because of those co-curriculars I made time for."*
>
> Mia, Year 11, Australia

She later expanded on what this broader definition could look like:

> ***"Having a good friendship circle and being confident in themselves is super, super valuable... I think being confident can hugely impact, you know, wellbeing and academic performance. I think a successful student will do well academically, whatever they define well as, whilst having a good balance with seeing friends, and playing sport, and getting exercise in, and doing something they enjoy, whether that's in or outside of school."***
>
> MIA, YEAR 11, AUSTRALIA



Implications and Recommendations

Shape the Environment Around Achievement

Develop the Capacity to Perform

Anchor Meaning in an Internal Definition of Success

Implications and Recommendations

To foster academic achievement and wellbeing, schools and parents must move beyond individual coping strategies and address both the systemic environment and student capability. The findings point to three primary domains for intervention:

Shape the Environment Around Achievement

Findings 1-4 showed that pressure is internalised from school, family and digital environments until it becomes self-imposed; that peer comparison recalibrates the meaning of achievement; that social media commercialises achievement anxiety; and that although students believe their schools value wellbeing, they perceive those same schools as holding an achievement-saturated definition of success.

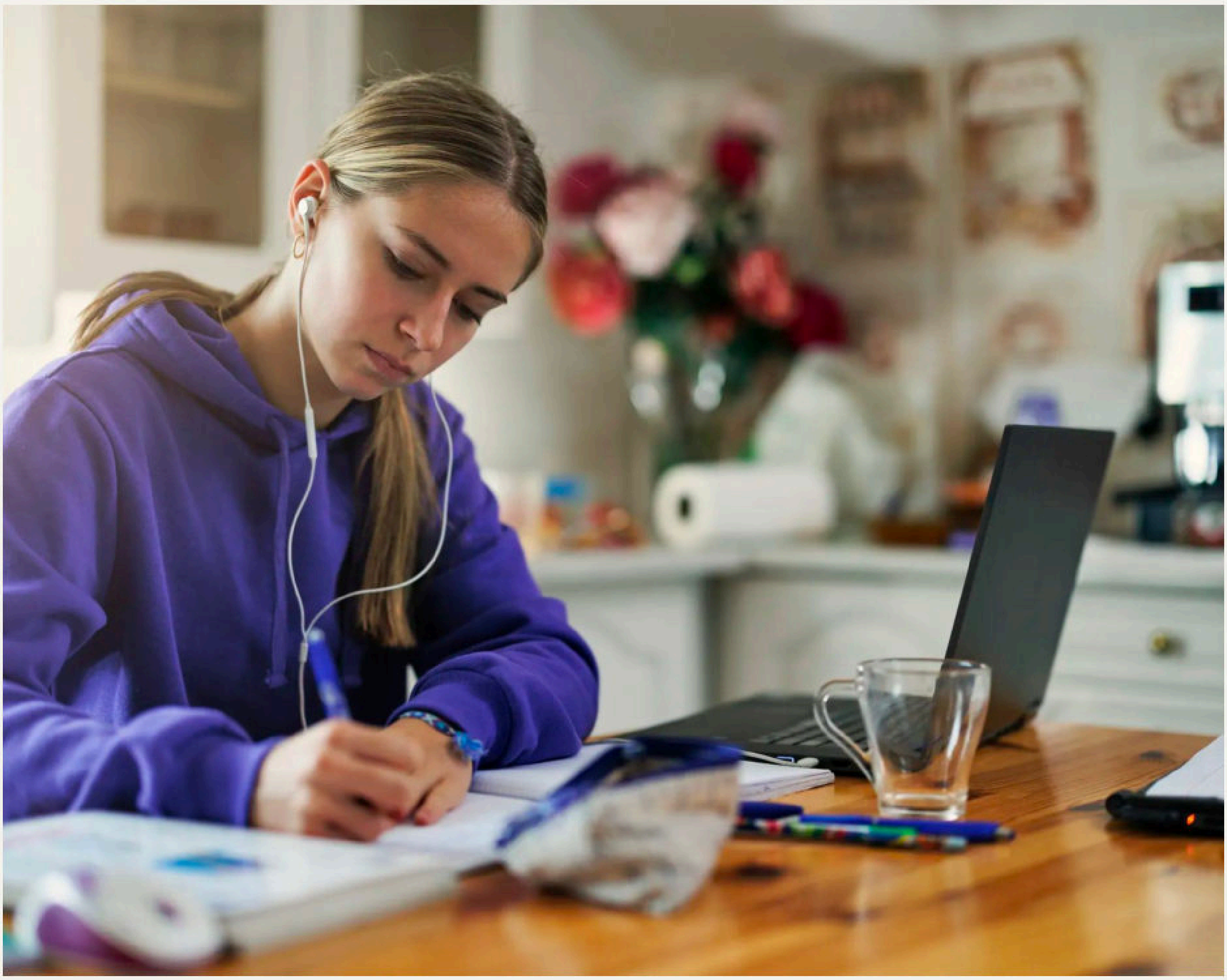
To align institutional culture with wellbeing:

- **Embed wellbeing as academic strategy (school leaders and parents):** position wellbeing measures, including sleep, nutrition, and positive social relationships, as essential performance foundations, not as alternatives to academic success[15]. Students themselves framed wellbeing as a foundation of achievement, a theme established early in the report's Foundation: "Having wellbeing sets you up to be able to achieve academically."
- **Distinguish healthy challenge from harmful distress (teachers):** Students explicitly asked for this guidance (Finding 1: "maybe we don't know the difference between what's good for us and what gets to a point where it's unhealthy"). Educational programs should teach students to differentiate between motivating stress (eustress), which mobilises focus, and debilitating anxiety (distress), which impairs cognitive capacity. Training students to reframe physiological arousal as a functional aid as opposed to a threat can reduce test anxiety, preserve working memory, and boost performance[16,17].
- **Promote media literacy and counter digital comparison (teachers and parents):** Finding 3 showed how social media has become an industry that profits from achievement anxiety. Accompany digital access with explicit instruction on how social media algorithms, curated perfectionism, and intense online comparison erode student self-worth, equipping girls with the media literacy needed to anchor their value internally[18].
- **Temper visible comparison (school leaders):** Finding 2 demonstrated an environment where the temperature of comparison could be lowered without lowering standards, when marks were kept private and recognition was redirected toward citizenship. Schools could also consider placing greater emphasis on personal improvement and individualised goals.

Develop the Capacity to Perform

Findings 5 and 6 showed that students know sleep drives performance yet trade it away under pressure, and that organisation is the lever that lets achievement and wellbeing coexist. Students frequently rely on reactive strategies that erode performance and increase cognitive load. Schools should explicitly teach self-regulated learning and executive function capabilities to boost performance and wellbeing:

- **Integrate time management and planning:** Replace generic time management advice with explicit modelling of task breakdown, prioritisation, and distributed planning cycles throughout the term[19]. Students who maintained clear systems used them to set boundaries that protected rest. “Time management is such a big thing for me… I set reminders, make to-do lists, plan out my weekends and after-school time. It really helps me feel a lot less stressed, and it keeps me making time for other things, like seeing my friends and personal care.” (Brooke, Grade 11, USA)
- **Protect sleep capacity:** Address the counterproductive ‘sleep or grades’ trade-off directly, as sacrificing sleep before an assessment can impair performance and increase cognitive load[20]. Finding 5 showed the awareness-action gap: the challenge is not knowledge but the cumulative pressure of assessment periods and peer calibration.



Anchor Meaning in an Internal Definition of Success

Findings 7 and 8 showed that girls carry inherited opportunity, and that they hold broad personal definitions of success whilst perceiving narrower institutional ones. To counteract pervasive peer comparison and social media pressures, educators and parents must support internal self-worth:

- **Focus success on personal growth:** Schools and parents should redefine success around individual improvement by actively celebrating progress and effort alongside grades. This approach eases academic stress, protects student wellbeing, and fosters long-term psychological resilience[21].
- **Co-design and empower girls' voices in educational environments:** Establish formal structures within co-educational schools that position adolescent girls as active co-designers of mental health strategies and school policies. By empowering girls to speak openly about their experiences, schools can ensure support systems address girls' self-identified needs[6]. The Student Voices section of this report, particularly students' answers to “If every principal was listening...”, offers a starting agenda.
- **Teach process-orientation and growth-mindset:** Supporting students to focus on process-orientation and growth mindset development may support their wellbeing and academic achievement. Growth-mindset intervention work has shown that shifting how adolescents interpret challenge and effort can improve academic outcomes[22].



Student Voices

While the preceding sections present our interpretation of the data through reflexive thematic analysis, we also wanted to preserve the richness of the students' own words. This section organises students' responses by interview question, allowing readers to engage directly with the perspectives of the girls who generously contributed to this research.

Q: What Advice Would You Give to a Younger Girl Who Wants to Look After Her Wellbeing?

> *"Remember that you're very much an individual. Just be focused on yourself — your wellbeing and your success has nothing to do with anyone else. Just be confident in what you like and what helps you."*



"Academics are really important, especially if you have such big goals, like going into medicine... Obviously you need to have good academics, but at the end of the day, if you don't have good wellbeing, a good mindset towards these things, then you'll never be able to achieve it."

Balance. Just being able to balance extracurriculars and school and family and friends.

"Make sure you have a good support system. That's honestly the most important thing — people who can tell you when you're taking on too much, or people who can motivate you to take on more."

"Don't compare yourselves to others."

"Eat well, exercise well, sleep well."



Q: What Advice Would You Give to a Younger Girl with High Academic Aspirations?

> *"Push yourself, because it's going to be really worth it in the end, but know your limits and prioritise your mental health over everything. Always be kind to yourself, and remember that other people are in different situations than you are, and don't compare yourself too much."*



"Keep those aspirations. It's good to dream big; it gives you motivation and something to work towards, but also to remember that if you're setting high expectations for yourself, they'll be difficult to achieve. At the end of the day, it's okay if you don't meet them."

"If you've got high aspirations, if you've got the motivation, and if you just work for it, then you can definitely get there. You've just got to work."

"Don't let that define you. Don't let those academic aspirations make or break your mood for the day, or your wellbeing. Don't let it overtake other opportunities you have, or destroy friendships or relationships... But also shoot for the stars."

"Don't pressure yourself to get the A+. Pressure yourself to fully understand the material. Because if you fully understand the material, the good grade will follow."

"You need a balance."

> *"It's good to have big aspirations, but for the time being, all you can do is try your best and not put unhealthy pressures on yourself."*



Q: If Every Principal or Head of School in Australia and the United States Was Listening, What Would You Want Them to Know?

> *"It's important to care about your students as people, and not only as students. They should understand how much wellbeing affects academic performance, and it's important for their students to be doing well in order to do well in school."*



> *"Your school is not just a collective. Every student is individual, so they have their individual challenges, personalities and experiences at home. They're not just students; they're people with their own identities."*

> *"While school is amazing for students and gives them an amazing opportunity, I think less pressure and less peer comparison would be really nice. I think more prioritisation of mental health would be important."*

> *"Be mindful of the pressure that you put on your students. They already have a lot on their plate. If you tell them they have to reach this grade, it's going to be a lot worse for both their academic achievement and their wellbeing."*

> *"Everyone has their niche, and I think it's very important for everyone to find it, even if it's not of the standards that teachers or principals set."*

> *"Try to be authentic about what you do with the school, and try to keep listening to people. Listening to the students is what helps create a good school atmosphere."*

> *"I think always having a helping hand there is really important. A lot of people need help, whether it's academically or mentally."*

> *"Having good teachers is such an important responsibility for those people running schools, to ensure that kids are getting the best experience academically and in terms of wellbeing."*

> *"We're all just growing girls or teenagers, and we're all trying our best. Sometimes we just need reassurance that we're doing well. We don't always need external motivation, because that just puts pressure on us."*



It's very important to build a very strong community where everybody feels like they belong. Everyone feels like an individual within a group — so that they feel like they have individual value, but also that the community they're in has value. That's the base of the school, and if you feel happy where you are and your wellbeing's good, that's what's going to help you thrive the most, because you're not going to do well if you feel unhappy.



Towards a New Understanding of Academic Wellbeing

The girls featured in this report demonstrate extraordinary drive, capability, and ambition. Representing a high-performing cohort at the cutting edge of academic and personal achievement, they possess remarkable self-awareness and an impressive capacity for growth. A modern understanding of academic wellbeing recognises that high performance and human flourishing are mutually reinforcing: when we protect and nurture student capacity we actively empower students to reach heights that are both extraordinary and sustainable.

To support them and further unleash their potential, schools and families can transition to the Environment-Capacity-Meaning model:

Shape the Environment around achievement

School cultures can build on their students' natural drive by actively cultivating growth-oriented environments, giving clear guidance on the line between healthy and unhealthy pressure, and lowering the temperature of visible comparison.

Develop the Capacity to perform

Executive function skills, such as strategic task breakdown, planning, and time-blocking should be taught as high-leverage performance tools. Sleep, recovery, and physical baseline habits should be framed as essential foundations for peak performance, as opposed to being traded away when pressure rises.

Anchor Meaning in an internal definition of success

Equipping students with media literacy, and an internally anchored definition of success ensures that their ambition remains driven by their own passions and goals rather than the performance of others.

Ultimately, supporting ambitious girls is about providing the launchpad for them to thrive. By shaping supportive environments, building sustainable performance capabilities, and strengthening their sense of self, we can create educational spaces where exceptional students can truly thrive, lead, innovate, and excel.

Where to From Here

This study is a starting point, not a conclusion. Its findings rest on 24 interviews with a purposive sample of high-achieving girls in two countries, analysed by a single coder, at a single point in time. Open questions remain for future research: whether these patterns hold across larger and more diverse samples; how boys in the same environments experience the same pressures; how the performance–wellbeing loop behaves longitudinally, across an assessment cycle or a school career; and what happens, at the school level, when institutions deliberately redesign their cultures to support students with comparison and pressure.

What the girls themselves ask for, though, is already clear. In the words of one:

> *"We're all just growing girls or teenagers, and we're all trying our best. Sometimes we just need reassurance that we're doing well."*
>
> CAROLINE, YEAR 9, AUSTRALIA



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Appendix A:
Methodology & Research Design

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of adolescent girls using a primary qualitative interview model contextualised by descriptive survey data. Semi-structured interviews captured the core thematic insights, while survey items offered baseline descriptive context to support narrative interpretation rather than standalone statistical inference.

Participants

Twenty-four adolescent girls aged 14–18 participated in the study. Participants were recruited through school networks, educational communities, and parent and student referrals across Australia and the United States.

The sample comprised students from academically rigorous school environments, including independent schools in Australia and high-performing public and independent schools in the United States. Collectively, participants attended schools with strong academic cultures and high university progression rates.

Measures & Data Collection

Data were collected during a single 60-minute Zoom session per participant, facilitated by the principal investigator with a female research assistant present for transcription support and participant safeguarding. Data collection followed a sequential two-part process:

- **Researcher-Administered Survey (Contextual Baseline):** To establish baseline contextual measures, participants first completed a researcher-developed Likert-scale questionnaire covering seven key domains of student life (academic achievement and wellbeing; pressure, expectations and perfectionism; teacher influence, school culture and support; sleep; social influences and modern pressures; thriving, future and recommendations; and an influence ranking). The principal investigator screen-shared the survey items during the Zoom call, and participants responded verbally prior to the semi-structured qualitative interview.
- **Semi-Structured Qualitative Interview (Primary Data):** Immediately following the survey, participants engaged in an in-depth semi-structured qualitative interview. The interview protocol probed participants' lived experiences of academic pressure, self-worth, school cultures, and coping mechanisms, allowing students to expand on survey topics and elaborate in their own words.

The full question set and survey items are included in Appendix B.

Analysis

Qualitative interview transcripts served as the primary data source and were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis[9]. Coding was conducted iteratively by the principal investigator using a reflexive single-coder approach, moving from familiarisation and initial coding to candidate theme generation, refinement, and final definition. Analytic memos were maintained throughout to critically examine researcher assumptions.

Quantitative survey responses were analysed descriptively using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. The survey data provided contextual grounding to complement and support the narrative interpretation rather than test hypotheses or generate inferential statistical claims.

Ethics

While independent of a formal university HREC, the research protocol was benchmarked against ethical standards and externally reviewed by an educational psychologist and researcher.

Participant safeguarding measures included:

- Informed parental consent and student assent.
- A structured distress protocol (allowing breaks, skipping questions, or pausing interviews).
- Full participant de-identification and secure data handling.
- Participant data withdrawal rights prior to analysis.
- A female research assistant present during Zoom sessions as a safeguarding measure.
- Gift vouchers provided to all participants regardless of interview completion.
- Follow-up email with wellbeing support resources sent to participant and their parent/guardian.

Positionality & Limitations

Researcher Positionality: The principal investigator is the founder of Many Roads, an educational coaching practice specialising in student performance and executive coaching. While no study participants were clients, reflexive journaling and external academic review were utilised to manage potential biases.

Limitations: Study findings reflect a qualitative, cross-sectional design utilising purposive convenience sampling across high-performing independent and public schools in Australia and the U.S. As such, results are intended to offer deep analytical insights and thematic transferability rather than statistical generalisability.

Appendix B:
Data Collection & Research Interview Guide

B.1 Participant Information & Safeguarding Protocol

- **Participant Background Data:** Participant Name, Country (Australia / USA), Age, Grade, School Type (Co-educational / Girls, Boarding / Day).
- **Participant Safeguarding & Consent Verification:** Verbal re-confirmation of voluntary participation, right to skip questions or pause, de-identification assurances, distress protocol awareness, and explicit assent for audio recording.

B.2 Quantitative Survey Instrument

Screen-shared, researcher-administered Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Items marked with an asterisk (*) are reverse/negatively worded to reduce acquiescence bias.

1. Academic Achievement, Wellbeing & Relationship

- I am satisfied with my academic performance.
- Academic achievement is important to me.
- I feel proud of my academic achievements.
- I am satisfied with my overall wellbeing.
- Wellbeing is important to me.
- I feel proud of how I approach my wellbeing.
- *My wellbeing does not affect my academic performance.
- My academic performance affects my wellbeing.
- When I am doing well academically, I tend to feel better about myself.
- I can maintain my wellbeing even when academic demands increase.
- Success at school involves more than achieving good grades.

2. Pressure, Expectations & Perfectionism

- I place high academic expectations on myself.
- I feel pressure to achieve academically.
- *I do not feel pressure to meet the expectations of others.
- Academic expectations motivate me to perform at my best.
- I am highly self-critical when I do not achieve the results I want.
- *I do not set very high standards for myself.
- I feel like a failure when I don't meet my own standards.

3. Teacher Influence, School Culture & Support

- I have at least one teacher who genuinely believes in me.
- My teachers help me feel confident in my abilities.
- I feel comfortable asking teachers for help when I am struggling.
- Feedback from teachers helps me improve.
- *Students at my school do not support one another academically.
- Competition at my school is healthy.
- I feel valued for more than my academic results.
- My school values wellbeing as much as academic achievement.
- I have adults I can talk to when I feel overwhelmed.
- I feel well supported in managing academic pressures.

4. Sleep

- I regularly get enough sleep to feel rested.
- Academic demands negatively affect my sleep.
- When I feel stressed, my sleep is affected.
- *I do not prioritise sleep even during busy periods of the school year.

5. Social Influences & Modern Pressures

- Social media influences how I think about success.
- *Social media does not influence how I feel about myself.
- I often compare myself to others.
- Thinking about my future creates pressure for me.
- Expectations from society place pressure on girls to achieve.
- Girls today face unique pressures compared with previous generations.

6. Thriving, Future & Recommendations

- I feel I am thriving at school.
- I have habits and routines that support my wellbeing.
- I know how to manage feeling overwhelmed.
- I feel supported in balancing academic achievement and wellbeing.
- I have a healthy balance between school and personal life.
- I am effective at managing stress.
- *I do not feel optimistic about my future.
- I feel confident about my future direction.
- Thinking about my future motivates me.
- I frequently think about my future.
- I believe it is possible to achieve academically without sacrificing wellbeing.
- Schools can play an important role in helping students thrive.

7. Influence Ranking Question

Prompt: Please rank the following influences on your academic experience from greatest to least influence (1 to 5): Parents, Teachers, Friends, Social Media, Yourself.

B.3 Qualitative Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

SECTION 1

Student Context

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
2. What are some of your interests outside school?
3. What does a typical week look like for you?
4. What do you enjoy most about school?
5. Do you have a favourite subject (or subjects)?

SECTION 2

Academic Success & Wellbeing

1. What does success at school mean to you?
2. When you think about doing well at school, what does that actually mean to you? Is it grades, understanding the material, or something else?
3. How would you describe the relationship between academic achievement and wellbeing?
4. Can you tell me about a time when you felt both academically successful and personally well?
5. Is there ever a gap between how well you are actually doing and how well you feel like you are doing?
6. What helps you maintain both strong wellbeing and strong academic performance?
7. If a younger student asked how to succeed academically without sacrificing wellbeing, what would you tell them?

SECTION 3

Pressure, Expectations & Perfectionism

1. What academic pressures do you experience in your day-to-day life?
2. Where do you think those pressures come from?
3. How do you typically respond when you don't achieve the result you were hoping for?
4. Can you think of a time when you felt under significant academic pressure? What was that like for you?
5. What does a really hard week at school feel like for you, physically and emotionally?
6. Is there a moment you can think of when school felt genuinely enjoyable? What made it feel that way?
7. What role, if any, does perfectionism play in your life?
8. If you could change one thing about the pressure students experience, what would it be?

SECTION 4

Teachers, School Culture & Support

1. Tell me about a teacher who has had a positive impact on you. What was it about that teacher that made such a difference?
2. How would you describe the culture of your school?
3. What does a "successful student" look like at your school?
4. What forms of support have made the biggest difference in your life?
5. Do you ever compare yourself to other girls at school? What does that feel like?

SECTION 5

Sleep & Health Foundations

1. How do you feel sleep affects your academic performance?
2. What impact do academic demands have on your sleep?
3. What role does sleep play in your wellbeing?
4. Does your sleep change during busy or stressful periods?
5. What makes it hard for you to get enough sleep? Do you think other students your age feel the same way?
6. What helps you stay balanced and look after yourself during the school year?

SECTION 6

Social Influences & Modern Pressures

1. What is the biggest influence on how you think about success?
2. How does social media affect the way girls see themselves?
3. What messages do girls receive about achievement today?
4. What do you wish adults better understood about being a girl at school today?
5. Do you ever feel like being a girl affects how teachers or other students see your abilities? Can you give an example?

SECTION 7

Thriving & Strategic Recommendations

1. What does thriving look like for a girl your age?
2. What helps you stay well during busy or stressful periods?
3. What excites you most about your future?
4. What advice would you give a younger girl who wants to look after her wellbeing?
5. What advice would you give a younger girl with high academic aspirations?
6. If every principal or head of school in Australia and the United States was listening, what would you want them to know?
7. Is there anything important about your experience as a student that I haven't asked about?

B.4 Participant Debriefing Protocol

- Post-interview emotional check-in and distress protocol assessment.
- Confirmation of gift voucher distribution and standard email follow-up containing wellbeing support resources (parent/guardian copied into email).

Research Team

Will Kirsop

AUTHOR & PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Will Kirsop is the founder of Many Roads, where he works with students to develop purpose and strengthen performance. Drawing on a background in education, psychology, and business, Will specialises in helping students develop self-regulated learning skills, including executive function and metacognition. His coaching blends evidence-based learning science with practical, real-world application, supporting students across demanding curricula and diverse learning profiles.

Will holds degrees in Commerce (University of Sydney) and Psychology (Swinburne University), where he was awarded the 2024 University Medal, and has completed Executive Education at UC Berkeley. Will is currently an MPhil (Psychology and Education) Candidate at the University of Cambridge. He is passionate about equipping young people with the learning skills, confidence, and agency needed to thrive at school and beyond.

Arya Singh

INTERN & RESEARCH ASSISTANT

Arya Singh is an 11th-grade student at Francis Parker School in San Diego, California. She is a keen water polo player, social justice advocate, and aspiring dermatologist with a strong interest in science and medicine. Arya has particular interests in chemistry and history, and is also passionate about understanding the experiences of young people and contributing to conversations around student wellbeing, education, and achievement.

Contributors

Editorial: Lucia Gagliardone

Design: Mariia Moskova

Many Roads

Many Roads empowers students to become self-regulated learners by strengthening executive function and metacognitive skills. By integrating purpose, performance, and wellbeing, Many Roads supports young people to build a clear vision for their future and achieve sustained growth through goal-setting and accountability. Learn more at manyroads.co.

Disclaimer

AI tools were used during the drafting process for editing, formatting, and structural refinement. All underlying data, interpretations, and conclusions remain the work of the primary author. Further, as a qualitative-focused study exploring a specific student cohort, these findings are contextual and not intended to be generalised across all school environments or student demographics.



Academic performance and student wellbeing are mutually reinforcing.

Academic Wellbeing: How Ambitious Girls Navigate Pressure and Performance