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Achievement Pressure & Mental Health in Independent Schools

Nina L. Kumar

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AC's team consists of experienced researchers, clinicians, and consultants who are dedicated to fostering resilience in schools

Nina Kumar
Co-Founder & CEO

- Former product mgmt at IBM Watson Health
- BA Computer Science and Psychology, Williams College
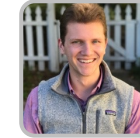
Suniya Luthar, Ph. D.
Co-Founder Emerita

Lisa Pao, Ph. D.
Director of Research

Renee Benoit
Scientific Researcher

Steve Lee, Ph. D.
Consultant; Professor at UCLA

Harrison Tool
VP of Engagement

Nicole Zillmer, Ph. D.
Scientific Researcher

Stephanie Ramsey, Ph. D.
Scientific Researcher

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Focus of today's discussion

**1** Summarize background: What we do, and the underlying science

2 Understand achievement pressure and the current state of mental health in high achieving schools

**3** Explore recommendations and best practices to maximize resilience

AC helps school and districts measure and improve well-being by determining high priority focus areas and next steps

1. Assess mental health
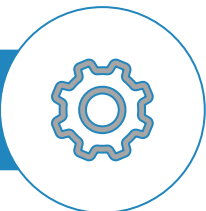
Understand how the community is faring on indices of mental health, such as **on anxiety, depression, and burnout**
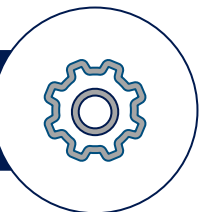
2. Use converging evidence to determine focus areas
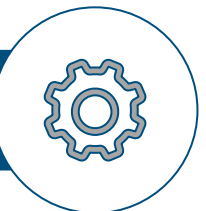
'Drivers' of well-being	Areas for Improvement
Which aspects of school climate are **most related to** mental health difficulties?	Which themes are **most often mentioned** as areas for improvement?

3. Determine recommendations and next steps

Focus Areas & Recommendations

Recommendations based on:

- Unique findings within the school
- Best practices from resilience research
- Guidance gleaned from work with other school

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Common myth: *students today are not resilient*

Reality:

Multiple societal and community factors give rise to intense pressure

Attaining parents' level of wealth is much more difficult

With declining admissions rates, gaining admission to a "top school" is more difficult

Students' accomplishments (or lack of accomplishments) are thoroughly documented on social media

Luthar, S. S., Kumar, N. L., & Zillmer, N. (2020). High-achieving schools connote risks for adolescents: Problems documented, processes implicated, and directions for interventions. *American Psychologist*, *75*(7), 983.

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Problem:
Students at high achieving schools have been named an "at-risk" group

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

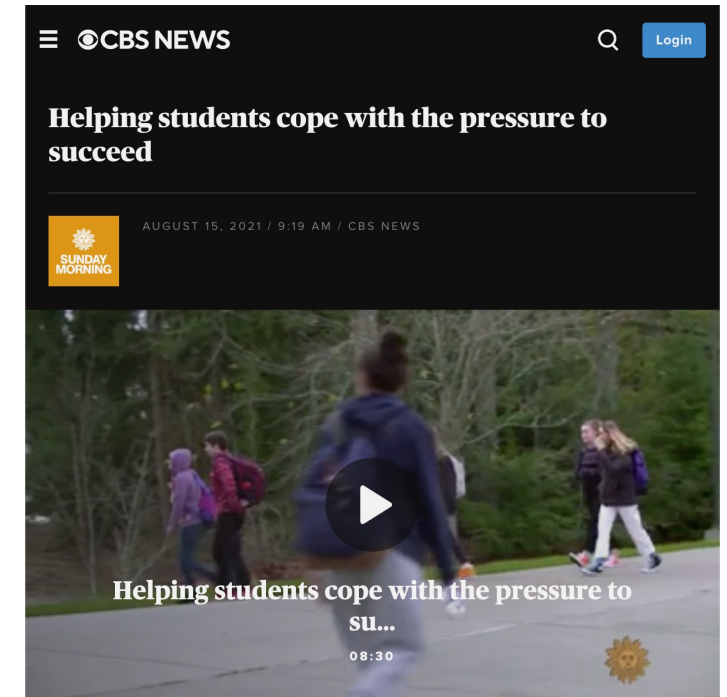The National Academies of SCIENCES ENGINEERING MEDICINE

On Parenting · Perspective

Students in high-achieving schools are now named an 'at-risk' group, study says

By Jennifer Breheny Wallace
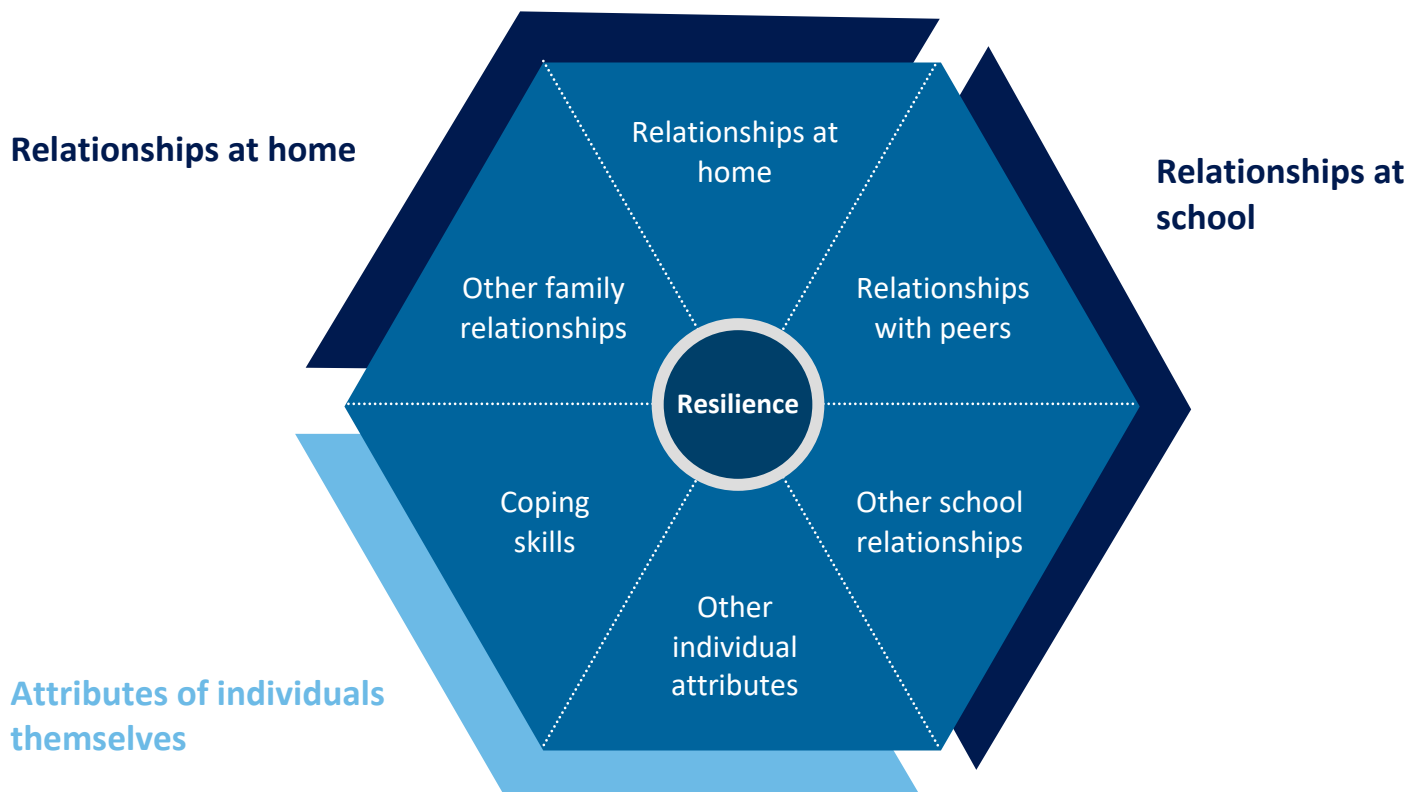September 26, 2019

CBS NEWS

Helping students cope with the pressure to succeed

AUGUST 15, 2021 / 9:19 AM / CBS NEWS

SUNDAY MORNING

Helping students cope with the pressure to su...
08:30

The Washington Post

CBS

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To address this problem, we must proactively foster resilience

Resilience rests, fundamentally, on relationships

Relationships at home

Relationships at school

Attributes of individuals themselves

Relationships at home

Relationships with peers

Other family relationships

Resilience

Coping skills

Other school relationships

Other individual attributes

In relation to mental health, "bad is stronger than good"

The protective benefit of positive aspects of relationships is often outweighed by the harm done by the negative aspects

Focus of today's discussion

1   Summarize background: What we do, and the underlying science

2   Understand achievement pressure and the current state of mental health in high achieving schools

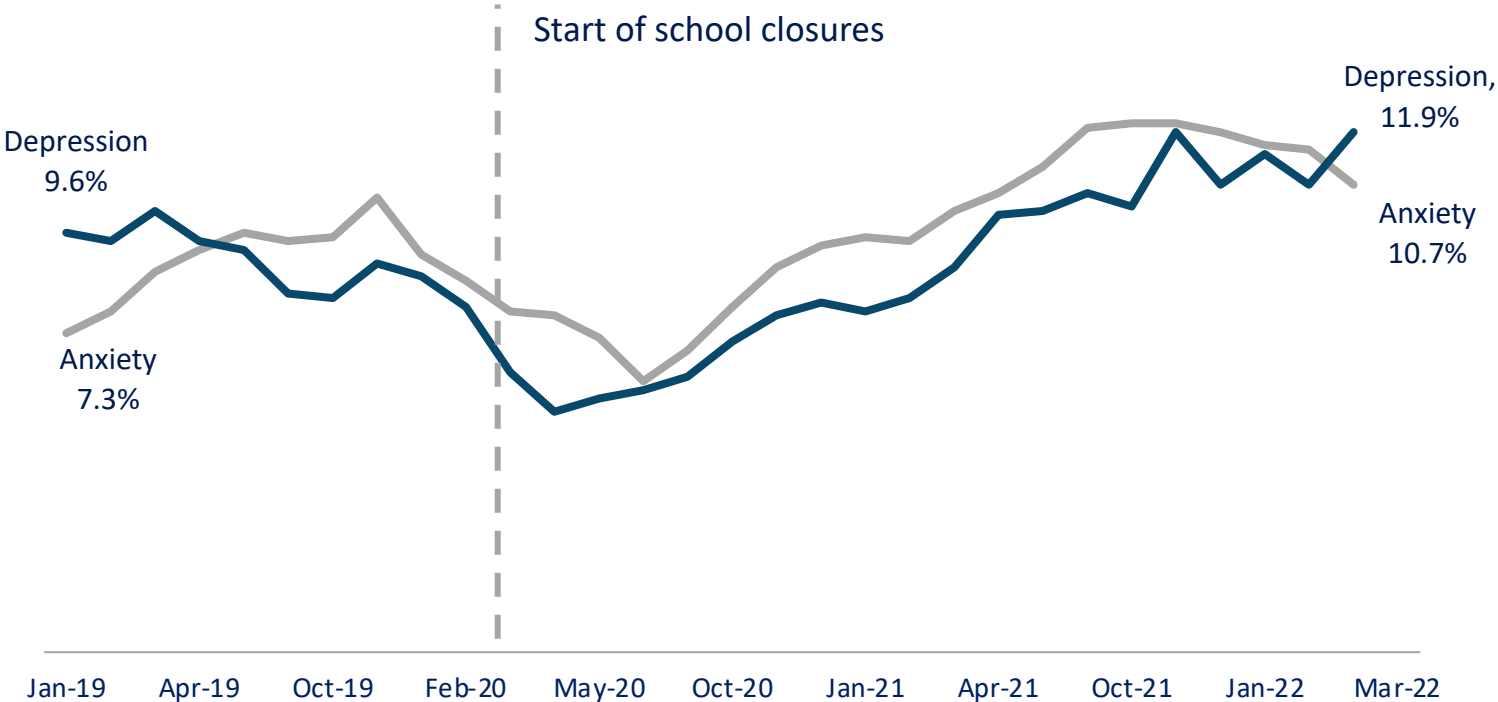**3**   Explore recommendations and best practices to maximize resilience

Among students, rates of depression and anxiety have risen after initially dropping at the start of the pandemic
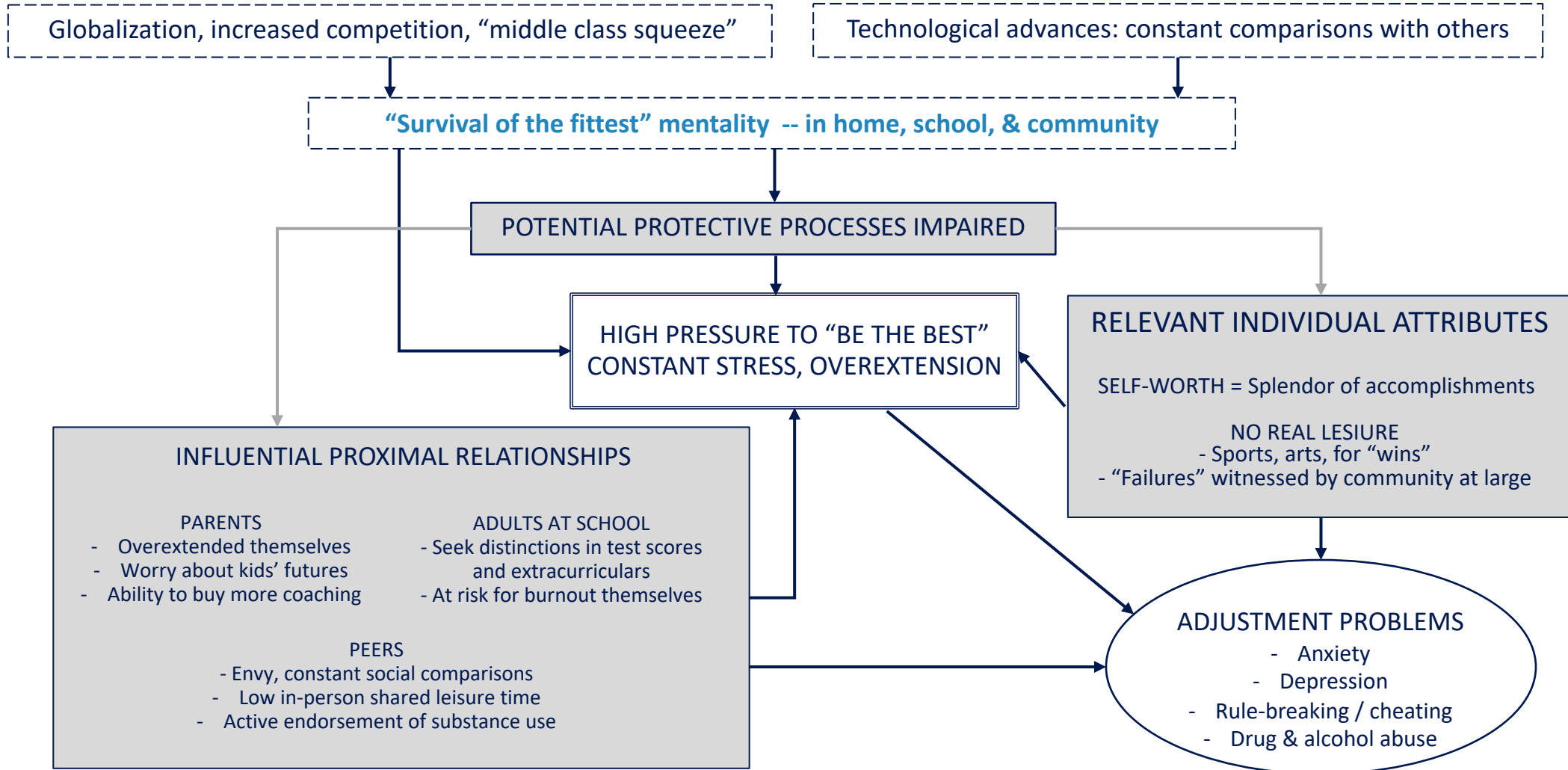
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12% Of students show clinically significant levels of depression

11% Of students show clinically significant levels of anxiety

Start of school closures

Depression 9.6%

Anxiety 7.3%

Depression, 11.9%

Anxiety 10.7%

Jan-19 Apr-19 Oct-19 Feb-20 May-20 Oct-20 Jan-21 Apr-21 Oct-21 Jan-22 Mar-22

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A confluence of forces are implicated in elevated adjustment problems among high-achieving school students

Globalization, increased competition, "middle class squeeze"

Technological advances: constant comparisons with others

"Survival of the fittest" mentality -- in home, school, & community

POTENTIAL PROTECTIVE PROCESSES IMPAIRED

HIGH PRESSURE TO "BE THE BEST" CONSTANT STRESS, OVEREXTENSION

RELEVANT INDIVIDUAL ATTRIBUTES

SELF-WORTH = Splendor of accomplishments

NO REAL LESIURE
- Sports, arts, for "wins"
- "Failures" witnessed by community at large

INFLUENTIAL PROXIMAL RELATIONSHIPS

PARENTS
- Overextended themselves
- Worry about kids' futures
- Ability to buy more coaching

ADULTS AT SCHOOL
- Seek distinctions in test scores and extracurriculars
- At risk for burnout themselves

PEERS
- Envy, constant social comparisons
- Low in-person shared leisure time
- Active endorsement of substance use

ADJUSTMENT PROBLEMS
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Rule-breaking / cheating
- Drug & alcohol abuse

Luthar, S. S., Kumar, N. L., & Zillmer, N. (2020). High-achieving schools connote risks for adolescents: Problems documented, processes implicated, and directions for interventions. *American Psychologist*, *75*(7), 983.

Parent relationships: feelings of disappointment and criticism from parents are associated with higher rates of mental health symptoms

Relative Strength of Association Between Depression and Top Aspects of Parent Relationships*

| | | 0.28 | 0.23 | 0.16 |
| Parent Criticism | Low Parent Mood | Excessive Hovering |
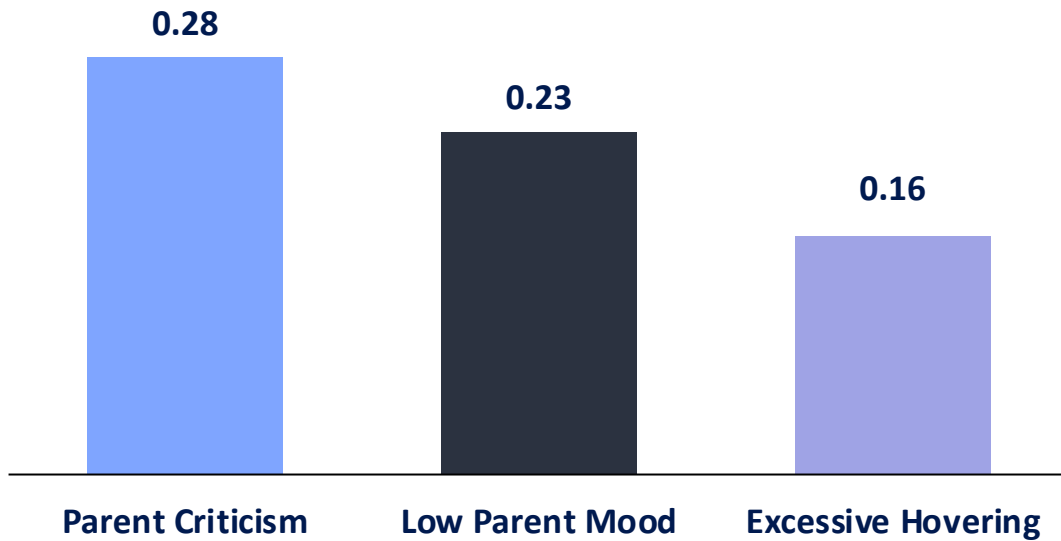
Top Potential Drivers of Student Symptoms	Example Item
Criticism	My parent(s) / guardian(s) make me feel like I'm a disappointment
Low Parent Mood	In the past 6 months, have your parents/guardians felt sad, blue, or depressed?
Hovering	My parent(s) / guardian(s) annoy or irritate me

*Aspects of parent relationships shown are selected of ~10, including feelings of warmth from parents

Examining parent values: perceived parent overemphasis on achievements was associated with mental health difficulties

Students were asked to rank order the top three, of the following six, items based on what they believed <u>their</u> parents valued the most for them:

How important is it to your parents that you…

excel academically	are respectful to others
attend a good college	try to help others in need
have a successful career in the future	are kind to others

Perceived parents' overemphasis on achievements was …

1 Associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and substance use

2 Did not benefit GPA

3 Was actually linked with <u>lower</u> grades and poorer teacher ratings (especially true when both parents were seen as high on achievement pressure)

In high-achieving schools, it can be highly beneficial for parents to provide a buffer, with balanced values

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Peer relationships: frequent comparisons on social media are linked with mental health struggles at independent schools

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~63%

Of girls at independent schools report high rates of social media comparisons (frequently feeling inferior when viewing others' social media)

*"A lot of my worries comes from body image... **There is so much pressure on appearance because of social media** and other students making fun of people. Sometimes how I feel during the day is controlled by the way I think my hair looks..."*

- Student Free Response, Spring 2022

*"[I worry about] the amount of friends I have. Everyone in my grade seems to have a distinct friend group, and I don't feel like I belong to a specific one... I never get invited to hang out with people from school, outside of school, so **I feel kind of left out when I see them posting on social media."***

- Student Free Response, Spring 2021

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Note: findings from ~65,000 students in grades 5-12, surveyed during the pandemic

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School climate: feelings of disappointing adults at school are associated with higher rates of mental health symptoms

Relative Strength of Association Between Depression and Top Aspects of School Climate*

School Standards	0.25
Teacher Alienation	0.07
Equity and Inclusion	0.16
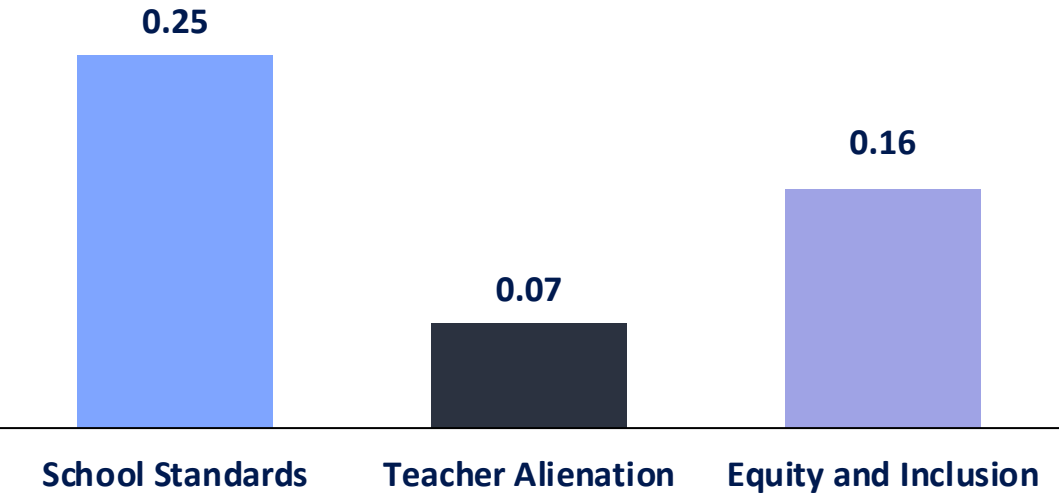
Top Potential Drivers of Student Symptoms	Example Item
School Standards	I never feel like I can meet the standards of teachers / adults at school
Teacher Alienation	My teachers ignored me or made me feel excluded.
Low Equity / Inclusion	Students are treated differently because of their race and/or ethnicity

*Aspects of school climate shown are selected of ~15, including feelings of emotional and academic support

In response to questions around their top concerns, students often mention pressure from various sources to succeed academically…

Pressure from Parents

- "My grades and being held back. **My parents yell at me every night about my grades** and they are talking about holding me back."
- "**I am most worried about my grades ever since the grade book became open to parents.** The grade book is now open to parents all the time and it gets me really stressed whenever my mom says to get my grade up."

Pressure from Schools

- "**I am most worried about school and being perfect.** I feel **like at my school if you aren't perfect you are labeled as a failure.** Because lots of smart people go this school, I feel the need to be just like them when in reality everyone is different."
- "Although the faculty here preach overall well-being, it is **clearly not a priority within this community**…. The **academic demands at this institution are far too high** for the lack of physical and emotional resources the school grants in return."

Pressure from Themselves

- "I am most worried about my grades because most people associate me with my grades, so **I tie a lot of my self-value to them**."
- "Grades 100%. **It is the only thing I focus on every day. If I get a bad grade, I worry for days**. I get anxious and feel nauseous. When I get home all I do is homework. I have no time to relax or hang out with my family."
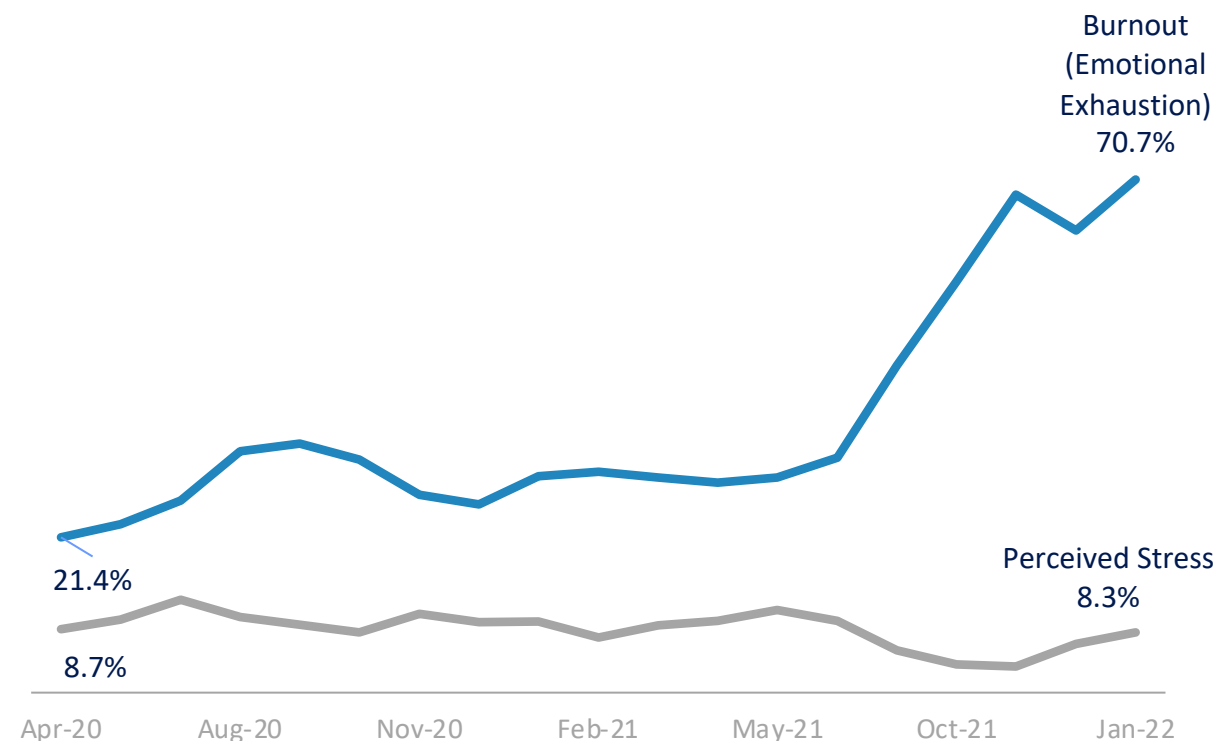
Among faculty, rates of high burnout at work have increased since the start of the academic year

**71%** Of educators show clinically significant levels of burnout at work

8% Of educators show clinically significant levels of general stress

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Burnout (Emotional Exhaustion) 70.7%

21.4%

Perceived Stress 8.3%

8.7%

Apr-20   Aug-20   Nov-20   Feb-21   May-21   Oct-21   Jan-22

Note: findings from ~7,000 school adults surveyed during the pandemic

Teaching faculty felt the highest levels of pressure to ensure that their students succeed coming from "My Own Standards" and parents

I feel pressure to ensure that my students perform well, coming from...
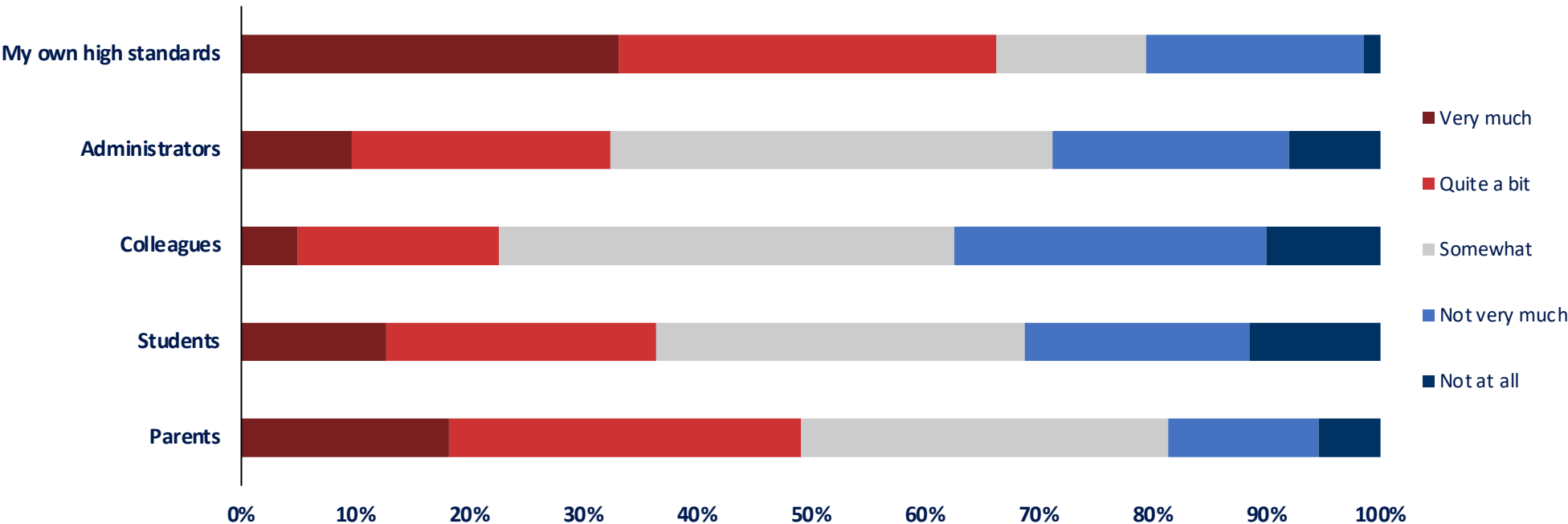
From ~13,000 faculty/staff surveyed between March 2020 and May 2022

Focus of today's discussion

1   Summarize background: What we do, and the underlying science

2   Understand achievement pressure and the current state of mental health in high achieving schools

3   Explore recommendations and best practices to maximize resilience

Promoting a "growth mindset" with students in high achieving schools can backfire

"Fixed Mindset"
Basic qualities, like intelligence or talent, are fixed traits; individuals spend time documenting success; talent alone creates success

"Growth Mindset"
Intellectual abilities are malleable and can be changed with hard work and dedication

Within high achieving schools:
- Students' successes are well-documented
- The "average" student is above average
- Students exposed to growth mindset interventions often only absorb the message that poor performance is caused by lack of effort

Luthar, S. S., Kumar, N. L., & Zillmer, N. (2020). High-achieving schools connote risks for adolescents: Problems documented, processes implicated, and directions for interventions. *American Psychologist*, *75*(7), 983.

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To effectively minimize academic pressure, schools should remain flexible in terms of expectations and should modify traditions to reduce comparisons

Understand that students and staff are still processing the strife caused by the pandemic
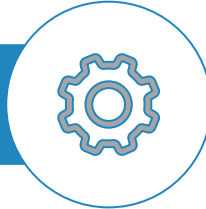
- Encourage practices and policies that foster empathy and understanding

- Examples:
  - "No homework days"; "no homework weekends"
  - "free pass" days to turn in work late without needing an explanation
  - Recruiting parents to handle staff responsibilities

Identify and minimize traditions that exacerbate comparisons without furthering education
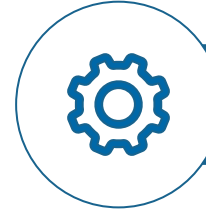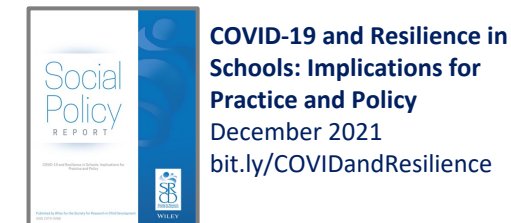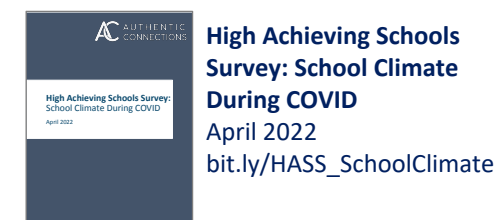
- Modify traditions that separate students into "haves" and "have nots" unnecessarily

- Examples
  - College sweater days
  - Class rank postings
  - Marketing statements, social media posts, and press releases that overemphasize achievement

Recent developments

Current Surveys

	Students (Grades 2-5)	Students (Grades 6-12)		Faculty / Staff	Parents / Families
	Children's Resilience Survey (CRS)	Student Resilience Survey (SRS)	High Achieving Schools Survey (HASS)	Faculty Resilience Survey (FRS)	Parent Resilience Survey (PRS)
Survey Length	15 Minutes	15 Minutes	30 Minutes	15 Minutes	15 Minutes
Description	• A short, easily-understood survey for students in grades 2-5 that captures actionable information about well-being and student relationships	• Provides schools with data on how students are doing on top indicators of well-being and modifiable aspects of school life	• Provides a deep dive on student well-being and targeted recommendations across peer relationships, parent relationships, and school climate	• Gives voice to all faculty / staff, providing school leaders with the insights they need to improve employee well-being and reduce burnout	• Offers parents / guardians an opportunity to provide feedback on the school experience

Research & Publications

High Achieving Schools Survey: School Climate During COVID
April 2022
bit.ly/HASS_SchoolClimate

COVID-19 and Resilience in Schools: Implications for Practice and Policy
December 2021
bit.ly/COVIDandResilience

High Achieving Schools Survey: Peer Relationships During COVID
October 2021
bit.ly/HASSPeerRelationships