

Charlotte Country Day School

January 2026

Upper School:

Our Ongoing Work to Reduce Student Stress and Counter Toxic Achievement Culture

As an **Upper School**, we are deeply committed to creating a learning environment where students can thrive academically and experience genuine well-being. In the last 18 months, we have listened closely to the pressures young people face, both internally and externally, and we have taken intentional steps to reduce unnecessary stress, promote balance, and shift away from elements of **toxic achievement culture** that can overshadow authentic learning. The initiatives shared below represent our ongoing efforts to design a school experience that values happy, healthy, and high-achieving students. We have made significant progress and will continue this work in earnest in the weeks and months to come.

Reducing the “High Stakes” of Midterm Exams

Last spring, Upper School academic leadership reduced the weight of midterm exams from 20% to 15% of the overall course grade. While we continue to value summative assessments as opportunities for students to show cumulative learning and make meaningful connections, this adjustment ensures that no single exam carries disproportionate weight. Our goal is to help students approach midterms as one part of a broader learning journey, **not a high-stakes event** that fuels anxiety.

Lengthening the Midterm Exam Period

Rather than cramming exams into one frantic week, this year’s schedule spreads them out over more days with a weekend as a buffer. This expansion decreases the number of consecutive days students have multiple major assessments, creates a calmer pace, and **reduces stress** so they can focus on measured, healthy preparation and adequate rest.

Avoiding Multiple Major Assessments

We remain committed to limiting the number of major assessments (tests or exams) a student can be required to take on a single day. When conflicts do arise, teachers provide flexibility and alternative arrangements. Our Canvas calendar already displays potential

conflicts, and we are implementing new technological tools to give teachers even greater visibility when scheduling assessments. These guardrails help **prevent academic overload and support student well-being**.

Homework Guardrails & Purposeful Design

While homework requirements vary across courses, our faculty are intentional about assigning high-quality work with a clear learning purpose. We continue to streamline homework expectations to prevent excessive nightly workloads and ensure that students see how assignments connect to broader learning goals. These efforts help students **maintain balance and reduce unnecessary stress**.

Intentional NMA and NWD Days

We continue to support nights with limited or no homework during Spirit Week, arts performances, and some major athletic events, so students can fully participate in community life. **No Major Assignments (NMA)** occur on the first day back from Thanksgiving, Winter, or Spring Break. Additional **No Work Due (NWD)** days are scheduled throughout the year following religious holidays and school-wide or division-wide special events. These intentional pauses make space for rest and connection.

Canvas Homework & Assessment Posting

Each Upper School teacher maintains a Canvas page where students can access syllabi, unit materials, and assignment calendars. Whenever possible, assignments are posted a week in advance, and teachers communicate major updates clearly in class. This transparency not only helps students stay organized but also **reduces the anxiety** that arises from uncertainty. Canvas enables students to view their workload across classes, anticipate busy periods, and plan ahead in a healthy, balanced way. By centralizing expectations, Canvas fosters calmer routines and empowers students to take ownership of their learning.

Reimagining End-of-Year Awards to Broaden Our Definition of Success

Last year, we undertook a thoughtful redesign of our end-of-year awards to ensure they reflect the full range of qualities we value in our students, not just academic performance or grades. We expanded our criteria to honor the many ways students demonstrate excellence and character throughout the year. Awards now recognize perseverance,

generosity toward peers, passion for a subject, personal growth, and the meaningful journeys students take as learners. By broadening our definition of success, we affirm that achievement is not one-dimensional and that the qualities students cultivate along the way matter just as much as traditional outcomes.

More Play & Conversation: The Impact of Our Cell Phone Policy

Our strengthened cell phone limits have **noticeably shifted the social energy on campus**. Students are playing volleyball, spikeball, table tennis, board games, and most importantly, engaging more often in face-to-face conversation. This kind of unstructured play and interpersonal connection provides the downtime students need to re-energize and maintain emotional balance, which supports deeper, more meaningful learning.

Athletics: Efficiency Over Exhaustion

We've begun conversations with our Athletics Department about reasonable limits on practice lengths and how to maximize instructional efficiency. This spring, our coaches will receive expert training in research-informed strategies to design high-quality practices that help athletes develop skills without overwhelming their academic, social, and family commitments. These efforts promote a **healthier overall balance for student-athletes**.

For any away game that has travel time of 1 hour or more, we have a policy of hiring a charter bus with WiFi (a REAL budget item that not all schools invest in) so that students can make use of travel time to accomplish homework and other assignments.

Strengthening How Students Learn Through Professional Development

Our faculty engage in ongoing professional learning through the **Center for Transformative Teaching & Learning (CTTL)**, deepening their use of cognitive science to enhance classroom instruction. Teachers are applying evidence-based practices such as retrieval practice, spaced and interleaved learning, and metacognitive reflection to help students learn more efficiently and effectively. This work not only improves academic outcomes but also gives students a clearer understanding of how they learn best, reducing stress and helping them study with efficiency and purpose.