

EXECUTIVE RESEARCH SUMMARY:

Raising Her Voice

Strengthening Student Well-Being and
Engagement Through Connection
in Girls' Schools





Introduction

To better understand the engagement and well-being of girls, the [International Coalition of Girls' Schools \(ICGS\)](#) partnered with [Challenge Success](#), a non-profit in the Graduate School of Education at Stanford University, to assess the well-being, engagement, and sense of belonging of over 30,000 students within girls' schools. This collaboration, conducted through the Challenge Success-Stanford Survey of Student Experiences 2023-2024, highlights where girls are thriving and identifies actionable areas for improvement in girls' schools globally.

The findings provide a nuanced understanding of how schools can foster environments where girls are academically engaged and supported in their emotional and social development. These insights serve as a blueprint for educators to align policies with practices that emphasize agency, connection, and well-being.

In the findings below, we share the results of this study and place those results within the context of other research on girls in girls' schools. This context provides more specific information and some suggested strategies for schools and staff within schools to take in order to improve outcomes for girls.

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Engagement in Learning

One of the central goals of this research was to understand the levels of academic engagement among girls. The survey examined behavioral, affective, and cognitive dimensions of engagement to categorize students into four groups: Fully Engaged, Purposefully Engaged, Doing School, and Disengaged. In general, the goal for schools is that their students are fully engaged, participating in school in a way that provides them a sense of meaning and purpose beyond simply engaging intellectually and completing school tasks appropriately.

Student belonging was a key aspect leading to stronger and more purposeful engagement in school and better coping skills to help manage stress. However, students without such belonging are at risk of disengagement and increased stress. Attending to the issues outlined in this report can help schools develop policies, practices, and educational programs that support girls' well-being and increase girls' purposeful engagement in learning.



BRIGHT SPOT

Over 63% of girls' school students report being Purposefully or Fully Engaged in their academics, reflecting a positive connection to learning in many girls' schools.



CHALLENGES

Approximately one-third of students fall into the "Doing School" category — completing assignments and meeting expectations but finding little joy or meaning in their work.

Student Agency

The survey highlighted the importance of student agency—the ability of students to actively shape their learning by sharing opinions, preferences, and interests with teachers. This dynamic interaction fosters meaningful engagement and builds confidence in students as co-creators of their educational experience. Students who are fully engaged are significantly more likely to express their opinions and preferences to teachers, as well as share their interests. Students in the "Doing School" and "Disengaged" categories report significantly lower levels of agency, with less frequent expression of opinions and interests.



BRIGHT SPOT

Nearly 30% of girls' school students report actively engaging in behaviors that demonstrate agency, such as expressing their interests or giving feedback to teachers.



CHALLENGES

Conversely, 30% of students rarely or never exhibit these behaviors, signaling a need to create environments that encourage more students to feel comfortable asserting their voices.

Further Research and Resources:

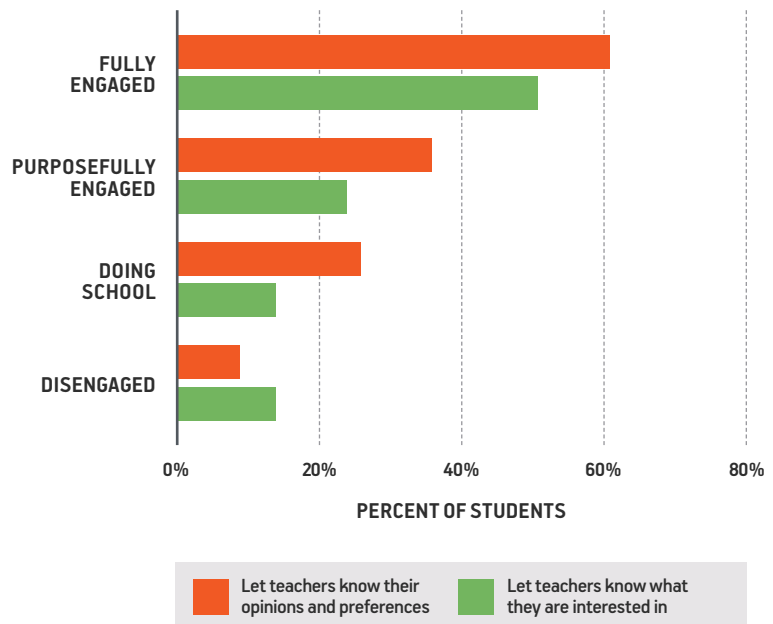
Several recent reports generated through the [ICGS Global Action Research Collaborative](#) and housed in the [ICGS Research Library](#) show practical strategies that increase student ownership of their learning. The following papers offer useful practices teachers can implement:

- [Academic Buoyancy: Empowering Year 9 and 10 Girls to Take Risks and Own Their Learning as They Problem-Solve in the Science Classroom](#); Linda Douglas (2022)
- [Using Learning Dispositions to Facilitate Academic and Personal Growth in Year 7 Girls](#); Matthew Bradshaw (2023)
- [Who Controls the Learning? Examining the Impact of an Autodidactic Framework in a Grade 12 Girls' Atmospheric Science Class](#); Eric A. Walters (2023)

Student Agency

In the data, students who are more engaged are much more likely to report exerting agency in their own learning by doing things like asking questions to help them learn in class; expressing their opinions and preferences; letting teachers know about their interests; and alerting teachers of their wants and needs.

STUDENT AGENCY & ENGAGEMENT



Stress and Coping

Stress remains a significant factor influencing students' experiences. The majority of respondents reported feeling chronic stress, with grades and workload being the most common sources. Of concern, 79% of girls reported exhaustion, and over half experienced headaches and sleep difficulties due to stress.

Yet, there are reasons for optimism. Students who reported higher confidence in their coping skills demonstrated fewer physical stress symptoms and a greater sense of well-being overall. This finding suggests that targeted interventions to improve coping strategies can have a profound impact.



BRIGHT SPOT

Students with higher confidence in coping skills report fewer stress-related symptoms to learning in many girls' schools.



CHALLENGES

Chronic stress affects most students, with 79% reporting exhaustion and 65% experiencing sleep difficulties. Grades and workload are the top stressors.

Schools can help students build resilience, foster healthy coping strategies for managing stress, and examine policies related to homework and after-school activities.





Stress and Coping

Further Research and Resources:

Stress has been an increasing issue for girls, in particular, especially since the pandemic. There are many articles in the [ICGS Research Library](#) that address these issues, offering a deeper dive into the causes of stress as well as potential policies and programs schools can put in place to mitigate stress and help students develop coping skills. Having strong teacher-student relationships, helping students develop positive approaches to managing stress, mindfulness strategies and encouraging students to focus on a sense of purpose are some of the suggestions found in the following articles.

- [Building resilience and enhancing wellbeing in girls' schools](#); Jacqueline Barron (2017)
- [Academic burnout in girls and boys](#); Vinter, Aus & Arro (2020)
- [Having it all? Adolescent girls' perceptions of stress in girls' schools](#); Spencer et al. (2018)
- [Can online support seeking help adolescent girls manage anxiety, depression and stress?](#); Mackenzie, E., McMaugh, A., Van Bergen, P., & Parada, R. H. (2023)
- [Academic 'learned helplessness' is more common in girls — but a teacher-student connection and a strong sense of place can help](#); Raufelder & Kulakow (2022)

Time Use and Sleep

How students manage their time outside of school greatly affects their well-being. Like many adolescents, girls in girls' schools are not always getting the sleep they need. The survey revealed:



Girls spend an average of **2 hours** on **homework** per weekday and **5 hours** per week on **extracurricular activities**.



Sleep is a pressing concern, with most students receiving **1.5–2 hours less** than the **recommended 9–11 hours** nightly.

These findings highlight the need for balanced workloads and structured time management to ensure students can meet academic expectations without compromising their health. Parent education on the importance of sleep might also support healthier habits for girls.

Further Research and Resources:

Several studies on sleep point to the connection between sleep and academic performance and suggest ways that schools and parents can help. Later start times, managing the use of digital devices at night, and educating girls about the benefits of getting better sleep are some of the suggestions found in the research studies below.

- [Adolescent sleep and school performance](#); Sharman & Illingworth (2020)
- [Digital media and sleep in childhood and adolescence](#); LeBourgeois, et al. (2017)
- [ICGS Research Guide on Sleep and School Start Times](#) (2020)

On average, students sleep less than 7 hours per night. Schools must consider the broader implications of sleep deprivation on learning and mental health.

Belonging and Support

Belonging is the idea of being accepted for who we are. A sense of belonging is a cornerstone of student well-being and engagement, and the survey reveals its powerful influence on girls' overall school experience. When students feel connected—to peers, teachers, or their broader school community—they are more likely to thrive academically and emotionally. The findings emphasize the importance of intentional policies and practices that foster meaningful relationships and a sense of community.

Further Research and Resources:

Results from the most recently available [Programme for International Student Assessment \(PISA\)](#) survey show that girls' schools do exceptionally well in terms of creating a sense of belonging. Several other resources show ways that schools can help foster the relationships and the environment necessary to foster a sense of belonging within the school.

- [Forging Powerful Relationships](#) (An ICGS Podcast Interview with Dr. Toni Cardiano hosted by Trudy Hall)
- [Girls Need Trusted Adults](#) (An ICGS Podcast Interview with Brooklyn Raney hosted by Trudy Hall)
- [The Power in Knowing You Matter](#) (An ICGS Podcast Interview with Jennifer Wallace hosted by Trudy Hall)
- [The 2023 Girls' Index: Exploring girls' beliefs, experiences and needs](#); Hinkelman (2023)



BRIGHT SPOT

Most students (88%) report having a peer they can turn to for support, and 69% have a trusted adult at school. These connections provide a strong foundation for emotional safety and engagement.



CHALLENGES

Students in the "Doing School" or disengaged categories are less likely to feel supported by adults or peers. This lack of connection limits their ability to cope with stress and fully engage in school life.

Strong relationships lead to thriving students. Schools that prioritize connection see gains in engagement and resilience.

Recommendations for Action



ENHANCE ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

Schools can implement student-centered practices that foster agency, such as personalized learning plans, collaborative projects, and opportunities for students to voice their interests and opinions.



ADDRESS CHRONIC STRESS

Develop comprehensive wellness programs, streamline workloads, and educate students on effective time management and recovery strategies.



PROMOTE BELONGING AND CONNECTION

Expand advisory models, mentorship opportunities, and community-building traditions to ensure every student feels seen, heard, and valued.



Conclusion

This report sheds light on the opportunities and challenges facing girls. The data reveal a strong foundation of engagement and belonging in many girls' schools, but they also highlight areas where intentional action is needed. By aligning policies with values and fostering environments of connection, schools can empower their students to thrive both academically and emotionally.



Empowering Girls Through Connection and Purpose

Schools have the opportunity to transform the student experience, ensuring that every girl feels supported and engaged.

