What We Learned About the Emotional Life of Students

Results from a Pilot Study of 14 Member Schools

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Executive Summary

A student’s emotional life has a powerful impact on their readiness to engage with the school community and reach their full developmental potential. This paper explores the roots of emotional well-being, academic engagement, and sense of belonging in the school community among 2,000 students in 14 ERB member schools who were administered the 15-question ERB Check-In Survey during the 2022-2023 academic year.

Feelings of engagement, well-being, and belonging are generally quite robust among students in independent schools. However, emotional well-being and academic engagement tend to decrease among students across Grades 6 through 8. Stress, part of emotional well-being, increases particularly sharply among girls through the middle school years. Students of color on average have an equally strong sense of belonging in the school community as their white peers. But when students of color do feel a lesser sense of belonging, that feeling has a greater impact on their emotional well-being and academic engagement.

Our analysis shows that fairness and belonging are the foundation of a student’s relationship to the school community. Any factors that increase a student’s sense of belonging will also increase their emotional well-being and their engagement with the school’s academic program.

Introduction

Over the last several decades, school leaders have become increasingly sensitized to the significance of a student’s state of mind for their ability to reach their full potential as learners. John Gulla, executive director of the Edward E. Ford Foundation, reports that “community” has been an abiding focus among school leaders and that “belonging” has more recently joined community as a central preoccupation. Concern about both community and belonging spiked in the last few years, as the COVID-19 pandemic increased the stress and isolation felt by students. Indeed, a “Hot Issues” survey in the summer of 2023 showed that 96% of heads of school rate “caring for students and staff through stressful times” as one of their main contemporary challenges.

Responding to this awareness, ERB developed the Check-In Survey in 2022. Composed of 15 questions on the student’s sense of their emotional well-being, academic engagement, and degree of belonging in the school community, the survey takes less than 10 minutes for students to complete and can be administered as often during the year as a school may wish. This approach respects the need to minimize time spent on assessment while also making it possible to identify trends across multiple administrations during the course of a year.¹

¹ For details on the contents of the Check-In Survey, visit www.erblearn.org/check-in-survey
During the 2022-2023 school year, ERB worked with 14 member schools in a pilot program that involved administering the Check-In Survey in conjunction with other ERB assessments. Participating schools provided us with additional information that ERB has not historically collected through our testing process, including the student’s self-identified race, ethnicity, and gender, along with how many years they have attended their current school, their financial aid status, and whether they have a documented learning difference. This paper will focus on what these 2,011 students in Grades 4 through 8 taught us about their sense of belonging, engagement and well-being at school.

Cultures of Belonging and Engagement

One of the primary lessons from our pilot study is that the student culture of belonging and engagement varies significantly from one school to another. Figure 1 shows the distribution by school regarding the extent to which students describe themselves as interested and engaged in their classes. The vertical line is the median level of academic engagement, and the shaded area represents one standard deviation on each side of that median. It is clear from the extent of variation that there are distinctive school cultures of academic engagement.

We found a lesser but still significant degree of variation among schools in their students’ sense of fairness and belonging in the school community (see Figure 2). By contrast, students’ sense of emotional well-being—how often they are happy, their level of stress, and whether they feel good about their lives—varies relatively little from one school to the next.
KEY INSIGHT Our member schools are highly effective at ensuring that students of every race and ethnicity feel like they belong.

How Race Affects Student Belonging, Engagement, and Well-Being

One of the most significant findings is that our pilot schools have been highly effective in creating environments of fairness and belonging for students of every race and ethnicity (see Figure 3). None of the differences between the racial and ethnic groups in Figure 3 reach a .05 level of statistical significance. Inspection of the results by individual school shows that students of color have a sense of fairness and belonging comparable to that of white students in every instance but one. This is a remarkable result that would likely be characteristic of relatively few institutions in American society.

Figure 3
Fairness and Belonging by Race or Ethnicity

Although the data suggest that students of color at the pilot schools feel the same level of belonging in the school community as white students, the results also indicate that one’s race does make a difference in how students’ sense of belonging impacts engagement with academic life.
KEY INSIGHT When a student of color feels they do not belong, those feelings are more impactful than they would be for a white student.

Figure 4 shows a positive association between emotional well-being and academic engagement for all, among students of color as well as among white students. A student finds it easier to be interested and engaged in their classwork when they are happy, relaxed, and feel good about their lives.

However, Figure 4 also shows that one’s sense of belonging is more closely associated with emotional well-being and academic engagement among students of color than it is among white students. If one does not feel valued or accepted in their environment—or as one of our questions puts it, if you don’t “feel you can be your true self in school”—then that will have some impact on anyone’s level of well-being and academic engagement. But that impact is substantially greater on students of color because, for such students, this lack of acceptance can be perceived as yet another instance of encountering the message that they are different and don’t really belong. A white student is more likely to treat an instance of exclusion or insensitivity as an anomaly. When those exclusions and insensitivities pile up, as they often do for students of color, then any additional instance of exclusion has a bigger impact on well-being and engagement.

This finding does not detract from the fact that the average level of belonging doesn’t differ between white students and students of color. But when there are feelings of not fully belonging in the school community, those feelings are more impactful for students of color.
Gender and Development Across the Grades

Our data suggest that gender also has an impact on student well-being and attitudes about school. The boys and girls in our pilot study felt nearly identical levels of fairness and belonging in their school communities. As Figure 5 shows, there is a modest but statistically significant difference (p<.01) in students’ levels of academic engagement, with girls more engaged in classwork than boys.

**KEY INSIGHT** Girls are more likely to report higher stress and wider emotional swings between happiness and sadness.

Figure 5 also indicates that girls have a lower level of emotional well-being than boys. Inspection of the individual components of the Emotional Well-Being score shows that girls are slightly higher than boys in the frequency with which they report being happy, but also significantly higher in the frequency with which they report being sad and under stress. In other words, the lower overall level of emotional well-being among girls reflects both greater stress and wider emotional swings between happiness and sadness.
One of our most striking findings with respect to student well-being, belonging, and academic engagement is the extent of evolution from Grades 4 to 8. On average, a student's sense of fairness and belonging in their school community does not change appreciably across the grades. However, Figure 6 shows that emotional well-being declines among pilot school students in grade 6 and then remains steady at that lower level through Grade 8.

Figure 6
Emotional Well-Being by Grade

Figure 7 shows that academic engagement also declines among the respondents beginning in Grade 6. Unlike emotional well-being, however, academic engagement continues to sag in subsequent grades. This pattern was consistent in nearly all of the participating schools.

Figure 7
Academic Engagement by Grade
KEY INSIGHT Emotional well-being and academic engagement both decline as students enter adolescence.

Two factors may be impacting students’ well-being beginning when they are 11 or 12 years old. Academic demands at school are increasing, particularly as one enters middle school. Children are also changing as they enter adolescence.

To separate the impact of middle school from the impact of adolescence, we took advantage of the fact that four of the schools in the pilot study begin middle school in Grade 5, while the remainder begin middle school in Grade 6. Figure 8 shows that the fifth graders who are in middle school have nearly identical levels of emotional well-being and academic engagement as those in lower school. This suggests that it is not the middle school environment that causes increased stress and decreased focus on classes so much as where students are in the human maturation cycle.
KEY INSIGHT The gap in stress between girls and boys grows steadily wider throughout middle school.

Adolescence may bring challenges to all children, but in some respects it can be more difficult for girls than for boys. We have already seen (in Figure 5) that girls have a lower sense of emotional well-being than boys, with higher stress levels being a primary culprit. Figure 9 shows that the gap in stress between girls and boys grows steadily wider beginning in Grade 6. Once again, the data suggest that it makes no difference to sixth-grade girls whether they are just entering middle school or whether they began middle school one year earlier. Life is more stressful for girls in this phase of their lives.

Figure 9
Stress Levels by Grade and Gender

Implications for Action

Our data on student perceptions align with the common belief among school heads that caring for students (and staff) during stressful times is one of their top challenges. Stress is a significant detractor from student emotional well-being, one that grows more substantial as students enter adolescence. Students themselves are well aware of the major role stress plays in their lives. When asked about their biggest challenges in developing tools for coping with their environment, students name stress management more often than anything else.
KEY INSIGHT Do everything possible to foster a sense of fairness and belonging and emotional well-being.

Educators cannot relieve students of the emotional toll of adolescence. But they can create an environment in which the impact of that emotional toll is minimized. Although all three dimensions of student attitudes are related to each other, the strongest relationship runs between a student’s sense of belonging and their emotional well-being (see Figure 10).

Figure 10
Relationship Between Student Sense of Academic Engagement, Fairness and Belonging, and Emotional Well-Being

More detailed analysis of the causal flow among these factors indicates that enhancing a student’s sense of belonging in the school community leads to decreased stress and increased happiness. Figure 10 suggests where educators should focus their efforts:

• Do everything possible to foster a sense of fairness and belonging among students in the school.
• Do everything possible to foster the aspects of emotional well-being most in educator control, namely school-related stress.

Efforts in those two areas not only support overall student well-being but also lead to other positive results, particularly with respect to student interest in and engagement with their classes.
Conclusion

Creating an environment in which students will thrive is among the most important jobs to be done in any school. “Thriving” encompasses more than just the cultivation of well-being, engagement, and belonging; it also means intellectual growth as well as the development of tools for navigating one’s environment and maintaining strong relationships with others.

For more insight into these aspects of social and emotional growth among students, see our companion research paper.

COMPANION PAPER

What We Learned About Students’ Confidence in Their Ability to Navigate the School Environment
About the Authors

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Dr. Thomas R. Rochon became president of ERB in 2017. His previous career in higher education included faculty appointments at Princeton University and Claremont Graduate University, a postdoctoral fellowship at Stanford University, and a year as a Fulbright Scholar in Japan. Administratively, Tom has served as dean and provost at Claremont Graduate University in California, provost at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, and president of Ithaca College in New York.

Within the world of educational assessment, Tom previously served as executive director of the GRE testing program at the Educational Testing Service (ETS). Tom’s scholarly books and articles include Mobilizing for Peace: The Antinuclear Movements in Western Europe (Princeton University Press, 1988) and Culture Moves: Ideas, Activism and Changing Values (Princeton University Press, 1998). He received his bachelor’s degree, master’s degree, and Ph.D. all in political science from the University of Michigan.

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Aaron Shuman is a technology professional with 25 years of experience in data-driven design and implementation. He has an educational background in statistics, psychology, and computer science with degrees from Yale University. In his current role at ERB, Shuman is the Director of Analytics and Insights, with a focus on providing ERB members with a better understanding of their students’ performance over time. His specific responsibilities include data integration and analysis for 360 Access, ERB’s data reporting platform.
Check-In Survey enables schools to quickly take the pulse of student attitudes about their emotional well-being, academic engagement, and fairness and belonging in their school community.