



Starting in the 2020-2021 academic year, a high-achieving school for girls in grades five through twelve partnered with Authentic Connections (AC) to build upon their longstanding commitment to balancing a high-achieving culture with a focus on well-being. The AC team used survey results to quantify mental health and identify focus areas; though there is still work to be done, student and staff well-being have improved.

COLLABORATION OBJECTIVES

The school wanted to assess student and educator well-being in their community over time and had three primary objectives:

- 1. **Continue to prioritize mental health and improve well-being:** better understand, support, and track student and educator mental health, particularly in light of the additional stressors from the pandemic.
- 2. Collect statistically sound, actionable data to prioritize initiatives and resources: utilize a scientifically validated survey instrument to use data to inform resource prioritization and guide wellness programming for students and educators. Findings over time would help track improvements and inform areas needing further attention.
- Gain input across constituencies: surveying students, faculty & staff, and parents would equip the school to better understand the range of opinions and experiences across constituencies.

To address their primary objectives of further prioritizing well-being, gathering actionable data, and collecting input across constituent groups, the school partnered with AC to administer the High Achieving Schools Survey (HASS), Faculty Resilience Survey (FRS), and Parent Resilience Survey (PRS).



RESULTS AND INTERVENTIONS

Using the survey results, the Authentic Connections team underscored several areas that were foundational to the school's efforts to improve well-being and also helped identify additional focus areas for the school.

Survey Findings: Identified Focus Areas



1. Academic success must be balanced with well-being. In all high-achieving schools, a culture of academic excellence and emphasis on grades is pervasive. Based on the survey results, the AC team identified that students wanted additional faculty flexibility and emotional support; students also perceived that grades were valued more than mental health.



2. **Relationships are foundational.** At this school, students consistently mentioned Faculty Emotional Support as a top strength. Survey findings revealed areas for improvement in terms of student support.



3. **Curiosity and transparency build consensus.** Transparency and curiosity are required to create change. The school has used the AC survey data as conversation starters, to inform opinions, and to affirm the work they are doing to improve well-being.

Interventions with Students in Response to Findings

Focus Area 1: Academic success must be balanced with well-being. Findings from the surveys informed several programs already underway (e.g. Mental Health First Aid, Health & Wellness curriculum, and assemblies focused on well-being), and also inspired new initiatives to address flexibility around academic expectations and support. The school

- Prioritized an approach to late work that sought to address root causes
- Implemented a late-pass system that does not penalize students for missed deadlines, but instead addresses habitual lateness with focused conversations and support.
- Used the survey results to inform wellness programming and the health curriculum.

In increasing flexibility for students, the school also increased autonomy and responsibility; this required thoughtful and intentional discussions about academic honesty and integrity, which the survey results helped guide.

Focus Area 2: Curiosity and transparency build consensus. The school shares survey findings with faculty / staff, students, parents, and the board of trustees to align constituents on goals and to support conversations about wellness. They have also allowed students, with guidance from school staff, to engage with the data and conduct further research on topics that most interest them. This opportunity has increased transparency and curiosity; it has also provided students valuable experience with examining data and identifying potential next steps to positively impact their school experience.



Focus Area 3: Relationships are foundational. Across survey administrations, students noted Faculty Emotional Support as a particular area of strength; that being said, some students also reported needing a closer connection with a caring adult on campus. The school used the AC survey findings and recommendations to inform conversations about student support and to ensure all students have a safe space to talk with someone about their struggles.

Student Survey Results

Though there is still work to be done to monitor and improve mental health, as seen in Figure 1, rates of clinically significant symptoms at this school improved over time for students, after peaking in spring of

2022. In the spring of 2021, 10.1% of students reported clinically significant rates of anxiety and 11.4% of students reported clinically significant rates of depression. These rates increased to 12.2% and 16.4%, respectively, in spring 2022. Over the following two years, however, rates of anxiety and depression dropped; in the spring of 2024, students reported rates of anxiety at 4.8% and of depression at 5.5%. The school has shown strong improvements in mental health symptoms among students.

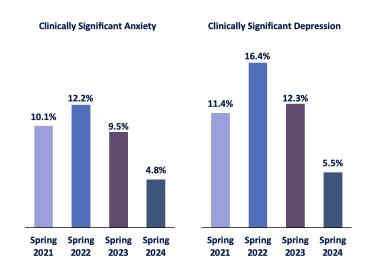


Figure 1: AC Survey Results over Time

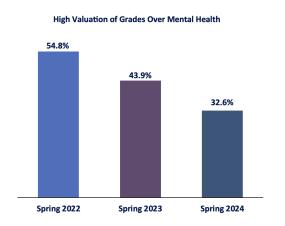


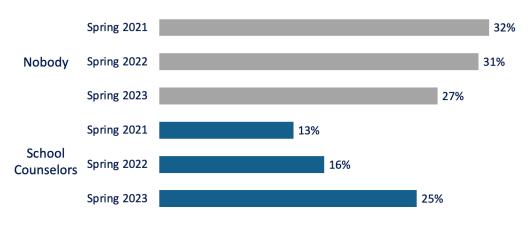
Figure 2: The Percentage of Students Reporting Grades Are
Valued Over Mental Health

In addition to improvements in mental health symptoms, the percentage of students reporting a high valuation of grades over mental health (students' sense that grades are broadly prioritized over mental health) improved over time (Figure 2). In response to a question about what the school is doing well to support their overall experience and wellbeing, in spring 2024, a student wrote: "The school makes an effort to have more open and understanding conversations about mental health and well-being. I think they are trying to make school a happier place for students."



In 2021, the AC team confirmed the school's sense that students were not confiding in the school counselors. Some students expressed worries about confidentiality when confiding in school adults. The school's interventions around bolstering student / adult relationships on campus were likely linked with improvements in their data. As seen in Figure 3, the percentage of students who reported that they would confide in a counselor when confronted with a personal or family problem increased from 13% in 2021 to 25% in 2023; further, the percentage of students reporting that they have "Nobody" at school to confide in has decreased from 32% in 2021 to 27% in 2023. This school has shown steady progress in bolstering student / adult relationships.

If you felt troubled about a personal or family problem, which, if any, adult(s) at school would you be most likely to confide in?*



*Note: Question was not asked in Spring 2024

Figure 3: The Percentage of Students Confiding in Adults at School

"The counselors are very supportive. I feel like I can go talk to them and my problems remain confidential." In spring 2024, a student shared, "the counselors are very supportive, I feel like I can go talk to them and my problems remain confidential."

The steps this school has taken to balance mental health and academic excellence have been appreciated by students and have likely contributed to the improvements noted in students' mental health symptoms and the survey metrics about relationships on campus.



Faculty and Staff Interventions in Response to Findings

Similar to the work done with students, the school has used the AC survey findings to direct programming in support of faculty / staff well-being. Resilience research has shown that if we want to ensure that students are doing well, we must ensure that their caregivers are doing well (Luthar and Eisenberg, 2017). Various initiatives were enhanced or undertaken to support the three primary objects of fostering balance, bolstering relationships, and building curiosity and transparency.

Balancing Mental Health and Well-Being



- Added two personal days for faculty
- Used findings to inform conversations about the school schedule, related to coverage / pacing, as well as perceptions of workload across divisions.

Bolstering Community Relationships



- Continued to ask faculty and staff for input and share results annually
- Expanded the work of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Office

Building Curiosity and Transparency Around The Findings



- Shared findings with faculty and staff to encourage further discussions
- Used the data to support committee work around curriculum and assessment

Faculty / Staff Survey Results

The percentage of faculty / staff at the school reporting clinically significant burnout has decreased from a high of nearly 80% in spring 2021 to a low of 49% in Spring 2024. One educator wrote, in spring 2024, "I think there is an emphasis on work-life balance that is established by my supervisor and team leadership overall." The school's efforts to further support faculty and staff well-being, in response to the survey findings, have likely contributed to these strong improvements over time.

Burnout (Emotional Exhaustion)

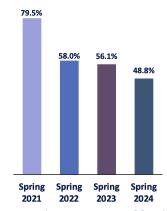


Figure 4: The percentage of faculty / staff reporting Burnout over time



CONCULSION

This girls' school partnered with AC in the wake of the pandemic to better understand how students and educators in their community were doing in terms of their mental health. Informed by the survey findings over the last four years, they have made efforts to further balance academic success with well-being, to strengthen relationships between students and faculty, and to build community consensus by offering transparency and encouraging curiosity. The survey data also enabled the school to point to concrete improvements over time in mental health symptoms among both students and faculty and staff. Ultimately, the AC surveys have been a valuable tool for enabling strategic thinking and data-informed decision-making around the school's wellness goals.

While rates of mental health symptoms for students and staff in the world remain high, schools are in a position to make a meaningful impact. Understanding student and educator mental health, and identifying the aspects of school life most linked with well-being in school communities, are important first steps to fostering resilience. The ongoing partnership between AC and this school is a powerful example of how schools can take targeted, purposeful action to improve community well-being.

REFERENCES

Luthar, S. S., & Eisenberg, N. (2017). Resilient adaptation among at-risk children: Harnessing science toward maximizing salutary environments. *Child development*, *88*(2), 337-349.

ABOUT AUTHENTIC CONNECTIONS

Authentic Connections (AC) is a team of leading scientists, educators, and consultants committed to helping schools measure, track, and improve student and educator well-being.

Learn more at <u>www.AuthConn.com</u>