Students in the top schools across the country are afforded tremendous opportunities to participate in extraordinary classes and extracurricular activities. However, this privilege often brings an extreme sense of pressure to succeed.

For almost three decades, our team has been studying students at high-achieving schools, who have been recognized in national policy reports as being a group at risk for mental health difficulties.

More than ever, these students are stretched thin. Gaining entrance into the top universities has become increasingly difficult over time, with a 60% decrease in admissions rates among the top ten U.S. universities. As competition for the “top” spots has grown, so have levels of stress among students as well as their families. Nearly two-thirds of parents today fear their children will not achieve a lifestyle or level of status comparable to theirs. With this ongoing stress, students become vulnerable to depression, anxiety, delinquency, and substance use.

Given what we know about the struggles these students face, the next question, naturally, is what should we do about this? Here, it makes sense to draw upon what child development research has taught us about resilience, which is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, or stress. What does this body of work say should most be prioritized, if we are to help at-risk students to truly thrive?

It turns out that even as today’s parents and educators strive diligently to help children overcome stressors, our efforts may be focused on the wrong areas. Specifically, many of the interventions, programs, and strategies that we employ in schools and at home focus on developing individual qualities within kids themselves — things like grit, self-efficacy, and perseverance. However, decades of resilience research have established that resilience rests, fundamentally, on relationships. Rather than placing emphasis on developing these individual attributes, science says that we should really be working to help improve the quality of close relationships in students’ everyday lives.
Developing these strong relationships takes work, and here again, our focus may be a bit off the mark. Many of us believe that to strengthen relationships, the task is to increase the “positive” aspects of our interactions, such as the number of encouraging or affectionate comments that we exchange. What research has shown, however, is that interactions involving criticism and harshness affect kids much more deeply than do those positive interactions. In other words, our task is to first weed out the negative, before we focus on pushing forward the positive.

Authentic Connections collaborates with school communities to address these issues by providing the top areas that should be prioritized for attention, based on data from each school’s students. We show administrators how their students compare, relative to peer schools, on important mental health indicators, and provide them with a “short list” of the top modifiable aspects of students’ lives that are most strongly associated with their levels of well-being. We’ve found that this individualized, deeper level of analysis helps schools to set actionable well-being priorities.

General Findings Across Schools

While every school we work with is unique, there are common trends. First, we see rampant social comparisons among students; they constantly compare themselves to one another in terms of grades, popularity, and appearance. While these comparisons have been going on for decades, social media has exacerbated the problem. At several schools, we’ve also found traditions that further magnify differences among students, such as “college t-shirt day” or the public posting of class ranks. The data clearly shows that it would be helpful for schools to identify and modify any traditions that exacerbate unhealthy comparisons among students, or create clear divides based on achievement, status, or family wealth.

A second trend we’ve seen across schools is the high significance of perceived unkindness. When students feel treated harshly by peers, teachers, or school staff, they are much more vulnerable to mental health difficulties. As we noted above, these harsh interactions affect kids much more deeply than the positive interactions.

To combat these problems, schools must create, and really enforce, anti-bullying policies; implementing these policies with care is especially important for at-risk groups. Many schools have unidentified groups of students who are struggling more than others, which our data have helped to reveal. In some institutions, it’s a certain class or grade that’s struggling, while at others, it’s students of a particular ethnic minority group or gender. Closely monitoring these especially at-risk students can help reduce their vulnerability and improve well-being of the overall student body.

Finally, teaching is one of the most stressful professions; in fact, it is known to be among the professions with highest risk for burnout. Students will only be well if those caring for them are also well. Increasingly, schools recognize the critical importance of ensuring the well-being of their faculty and are working with us to assess and monitor levels of faculty well-being.

We’re extremely grateful to all the schools we’ve worked with thus far that have helped us glean a rich and ever-growing set of data-based insights. If you’d like to learn more about our work or potentially collaborate with us, please visit our website at www.authconn.com.

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