

Takeaways from the Spring 2024 Challenge Success Survey

FROM

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At Menlo, we're always evolving to ensure an engaging academic program that stretches students while also nurturing their social, emotional, and physical well-being. One way we measure our progress towards this goal is through Stanford's Challenge Success Survey of Adolescent School Experiences, which is

designed to assess middle and high school students' perspectives on stress, sleep, homework, academic integrity, extracurricular commitments, physical health, belonging, parental expectations, academic engagement, and teacher support.

Last April, we administered the survey to all Menlo students in grades 6-12, and met with Challenge Success over the summer to review the findings. This was the fourth time the survey has been conducted at Menlo in an eight year period, so we can now see trends and gain a sense of the long-term impact of initiatives we have implemented. And, because many peer schools also use this survey, we can benchmark our data and gain a broader view of how we are doing as a school.

Menlo has taken significant steps over the years to enhance the student experience and prioritize well-being, including introducing a later start time for better sleep, eliminating homework over breaks, bolstering our academic support program, expanding counseling resources, investing in family support, and being more intentional around our student belonging efforts in both divisions—all while maintaining an engaging, challenging, and fun academic program. The 2024 Challenge Success survey results validate these efforts and affirm that we are continuing to advance our institutional goals, while also revealing areas for growth.

Here are some of the key findings that stood out to us and the Challenge Success team.



A CHALLENGING AND FUN LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOSTERS ENGAGEMENT



One of the first questions on the survey asks students to describe their school in three words. This year, for the first time ever, “fun” and “challenging/rigorous” tied for first place among Upper School students, at 30%. As a comparison, in 2022, “challenging/rigorous” was in first place at 47%, more than doubling third place “fun” (23%).

Over half of Middle School students also used “fun” as the most common identifier (up from 40% in 2022), followed by “caring and welcoming” at 39%. That so many of our students put “fun” at the top of the list both delights us and underscores the key principles at the heart of Menlo’s educational approach. We believe school should be fun, and students are most likely to be engaged in their learning when they are both challenged by and enjoying their classes.

Middle School

54% of students in grades 6-8 most commonly described Menlo as “Fun” followed by “Caring and Welcoming” (39%), “Difficult or Stressful” (21%), and “Challenging or Rigorous” (21%). Overall, Middle Schoolers reported “almost always” finding joy, interest, meaningfulness, and value in their classes and schoolwork, and feel more agency in their own learning than at peer schools.

Upper School

For those in grades 9-12, “Challenging/Rigorous” tied “Fun” (at 30%) for the top two most common descriptors. Rounding out the top four were “Difficult or Stressful” (28%) and “Caring and Welcoming” (23%). We were pleased to see that “Difficult/Stressful” has decreased by eight percent since 2022, reinforcing our core promise of high standards and high support.

This year’s survey also saw Menlo’s engagement numbers reach their highest levels yet. Approximately 65% of Upper School students and 74% of Middle School students indicate they feel “fully” or “purposefully” engaged at Menlo—a number notably higher than our peer schools. “Fully engaged” students are much more likely to emphasize the fun, caring, welcoming, and challenging aspects of school, with difficult or stressful becoming far less prominent descriptors. We were also pleased to see a drop in the percentage of Upper School students who reported “doing school,” or going through the motions, now at 26% down from 33% in 2022.

Our Challenge Success research team reinforced the strength of Menlo’s engagement numbers, indicating that they almost never see “fully engaged” ranked highest on the student engagement scale. They also noted that while reports of “doing school” typically rise alongside grade levels (indicating an increasingly transactional educational experience), engagement levels remain high for all Menlo grades.



Menlo's academic integrity numbers are similarly strong compared to peer schools. Challenge Success points out this is likely because our pedagogy is so engaging and our students are so invested in their learning. While 79% of Upper School students report using AI for school purposes—higher than peer schools—very few reported using it for cheating.

CONNECTION AND SUPPORT PROMOTE FLOURISHING

Strong, supportive relationships between students and educators are often said to be Menlo's "secret sauce." We, therefore, were pleased by the steadily rising number of students in both divisions who feel as though they have a trusted adult at school they can go to with a personal problem.

The Challenge Success team shared that in many schools, students report a lot of support in middle school, but levels tend to decline in high school. Here at Menlo, the sense of teacher care and support is strong across all grades and is consistently strong among different race, ethnicity, and gender groups. Even among the small percentage of our students who are "less engaged" and report higher numbers of "doing school," 85% still feel they have a trusted adult they can go to on campus.

Middle School

78% of our Middle School students feel they have a trusted adult at school they can go to if they have a personal problem, up 8% from our last survey and 5% higher than peer schools. Middle School students rate teacher care and support at 4.4/5, which is also above other independent/private schools (4.03).

Upper School

89% of Upper School students feel they have an adult on campus they could go to with a personal problem, which is up from 83% in 2022 and 73% in 2018. The Challenge Success team notes this

is among the highest levels they've seen in high school and is almost 10% higher than peer schools. For ninth graders, this number has reached 90%, up from 82% in 2022 and 66% in 2016. In terms of sources of on-campus support, 41% will turn to teachers first, 23% to counselors, and 20% to advisors. Overall, Upper School students rate teacher care and support at 4.19/5, which is slightly above peer schools (4.02/5).

This year, Challenge Success added a new "Flourishing Scale" to their findings report, which they created to measure protective factors such as purpose, optimism, confidence, respect, competence, and contributions to others' happiness. Their research has found a strong association between flourishing and connection, engagement, and belonging. While we don't yet have historical context, we did learn that Menlo fared quite well in this area, as our whole-school flourishing numbers resembled the "fully engaged" student data from many other schools.

We are proud of our commitments in this area and feel this data speaks volumes about the ways we support students and the caliber of the relationships that underpin everything that we do.





LEADING BALANCED LIVES

There's a lot of parenting advice out there that says that if you help boost a child's self-esteem, they'll do well in school. In reality, there is abundant evidence to show it's the other way around. Schools and teachers who hold their students to high expectations build students' confidence to meet their next challenge.

That said, if we challenge our kids too much without the necessary support and encouragement, it can lead to stress. In this survey, 54% of Middle School students and 72% of Upper School students agree that their parents expect academic excellence from them. We were pleased to see that the percentage of kids who feel as though they can meet their parents' expectations has increased since the last survey, with 63% in the Upper School (up 3% since 2022) and 62% in the Middle School (up 8% since 2022).

Middle School

Middle School students report major sources of stress as grades, tests, quizzes, finals, or other assessments; overall workload and homework; procrastination or time management; and lack of sleep. Nearly half of Middle School students feel quite or very confident in their coping skills with 15% feeling not at all or a little confident. They report an average of around 1.7 homework hours per weeknight and 2.1 hours on the weekends.

These numbers reflect a slight drop in weeknight homework since 2022 but a mild increase in weekend homework.

Upper School

Upper School students report major sources of stress as tests, quizzes, finals, or other assessments; overall workload and homework; future plans; procrastination or time management; and lack of sleep. Approximately 40% feel quite or very confident in their coping skills with 16% feeling not at all or a little confident. Upper School students report an average of 2.6 hours of homework on weekdays and 3.2 hours on weekends. This is down slightly from 2022, as is the percentage of kids who say they have too much homework, from 55% to 48%.

Our homework numbers, which have declined from surveys in 2016 and 2018, have been quite consistent since 2022, feel appropriate for our program, and are on target with each division's expectations. The majority of our students find their homework to be helpful, not "busywork."

Two things parents and guardians may want to take note of from these findings:

- When asked if they are doing other things while doing their homework, approximately a quarter of Middle School students and a third of Upper School

students say they are texting or using social media while studying. Putting the phone in another room helps students get more done in less time.

- Two-thirds of Upper School students say they have additional non-Menlo homework averaging 1.3 hours on weeknights and 1.8 hours on weekends. More than 50% of Middle School students say they have outside homework averaging an hour on weekdays and 1.5 hours on weekends. This outside work may be adding to their feelings of stress.

BUILDING A CULTURE OF BELONGING



Several months before students took this Challenge Success survey, Menlo administered an in-depth belonging survey to students in grades 8-12, parents, and employees. We shared the findings and next steps from that survey last May, and found the Challenge Success survey shared some similar themes pertaining to our strengths (e.g., students are happy to be at Menlo, are supported by their educators, and feel our environment is safe and welcoming) and areas for growth (e.g., creating a culture where our strengths are universally experienced by all community members).

The Challenge Success findings offered a few additional insights, particularly the opportunity to see some belonging data in relation to other independent/private schools. Overall, Challenge Success tells us that Menlo students' sense of belonging in both divisions is slightly above what they typically see. The vast majority of students in both our Upper (93%) and Middle (86%) School report having a trusted peer they

can turn to. This is nearly 5% above peer high schools and is consistent with peer middle schools. Menlo's rating on the Challenge Success Belonging Scale—which measures the degree to which students feel like a part of the School, feel proud of belonging to the School, and feel accepted, valued, and liked as they are—was also slightly above our peer group's data.

While our belonging numbers were generally strong according to Challenge Success' measures, we know we have more work to do. As we shared previously, we are striving for a school culture of kindness and respect where every student and family feels welcomed, included, and valued. In the coming weeks, you'll be hearing more from Marco Menéndez, our recently hired Director of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging, about our amplified efforts in this area.

AREAS FOR GROWTH

Academic Worry

Our students' "academic worry" levels have remained fairly consistent in the last two surveys; however, Challenge Success indicates they are slightly higher than peer schools'. While there wasn't much movement in this area across all students, we did notice one new shift in this year's data. "Academic worry" was higher among female-identifying students in comparison to their male-identifying counterparts. Relative to boys, girls reported sleeping less, spending more time on homework, and feeling less confident in their coping skills. We haven't seen this distinction articulated in past survey results, so we'll be paying close attention to this going forward.

Challenge Success' research indicates that those students who feel confident in coping with their stress have the least amount of worry. So rather than making the stress go away entirely, we want to help kids learn how to manage it. Well-being isn't happiness all the time; life has stressful periods and kids need to learn how to manage stress in a healthy way. This is a core focus of our wellness strategic planning efforts, which you'll hear more about in the coming months.

Sleep

While Challenge Success indicated our students' sleep numbers are better than many peer schools', they are still below the American Academy of Pediatrics guidelines. Our Middle School students should be getting nearly 10 hours of sleep but average 8.5 hours, with only about 33% getting the recommended amount. Upper Schoolers get an average of 7.2 hours of sleep on a school night, with only 4% reaching the recommended nine hours. Additionally, three-quarters of students report sleeping with their phones in their bedroom; those who put them outside their rooms at night report getting more sleep. As good sleep hygiene is critical to mental health and academic success, we are strong proponents of stowing phones in another room before bed. We hope you'll partner with us in this endeavor.

IN CLOSING

Overall, our students' responses reinforced that Menlo is a safe, nurturing, engaging, and appropriately challenging place to learn and grow. We were especially heartened to hear from the Challenge Success team that many of our Middle and Upper School students report feeling highly competent and capable, that they are good people, live a good life, and actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others. That is really what we strive for as a school.

These findings also validate that our current school priorities—specifically those centered around student well-being and belonging—are precisely the right ones to move this work forward. A robust family-school partnership is essential to these efforts, and we're grateful to work together with you to help our children lead healthful, balanced lives. To this end, Challenge Success has shared the following tips to help your child thrive, and they are very much in line with Menlo's philosophy. These are evidence-based strategies backed by significant research, and we encourage your family to review and embrace them.

PROTECT PLAYTIME, DOWNTIME, AND FAMILY (PDF) TIME

Avoid overscheduling. Children of all ages need restorative time to reflect and dream, and families need time to connect and build lasting bonds. Research shows PDF is critical for children's well-being.

EMPHASIZE LEARNING, NOT GRADES

Pressure to achieve only high grades can lead to cheating, physical and emotional challenges, and other risky behaviors.

CHOOSE YOUR WORDS CAREFULLY

If the first question you ask your child after school is "How'd you do on the test?" you are sending a message about your priorities. Instead, ask "How was your day?"

LET CHILDREN DO THEIR OWN WORK

Resist the urge to complete or correct homework. When you step in, it can actually undermine learning and confidence.

PRIORITIZE SLEEP

An extra hour of sleep is more valuable than an extra hour of studying. Sleep deprivation can be associated with depression and anxiety and can interfere with learning and engagement in school.

CREATE TECHNOLOGY-FREE SPACES

When media devices are moved out of the bedroom, children sleep better and are more efficient with homework. Unplug during mealtimes and other family activities.

CHALLENGE SUCCESS

Resist society's narrow definition of success and embrace your child's unique interests and strengths. Don't allow concerns about college admissions to dictate your child's choices in and out of school.