

From the
Upper School Director
and the
Middle School Director

*John Schafer and
La Vina Lowery*



Takeaways from the 2022 Challenge Success Survey

As a school, we are keenly focused on supporting our students' social, emotional, and physical well-being as well as their educational engagement and success. One of the many tools we use to assess how we are doing in these areas is the Stanford Challenge Success Survey of Adolescent School Experiences, which was designed to measure middle and high school students' perspectives on homework, extracurricular activities, sleep, physical health, stress, parental expectations, academic engagement, academic integrity, and teacher support.

We use the results of this survey, which we previously administered in 2016 and 2018, to better understand what our students see as stressful and challenging as well as their sources of support. It also helps us measure the impact of initiatives we implement to address trends and focus areas. After pausing this survey during the pandemic, our students had the opportunity to complete it last spring. As this is our third time participating in this survey, we are able to examine our results over time, and because virtually all of our peer schools administer this same survey, we are also able to see how Menlo is doing in comparison to our peer schools.

The pandemic was especially hard on adolescents across the country, including our students here at Menlo. Given what they've experienced over the past few years, we anticipated there might be a decline in some areas when compared with our past surveys. And yet, while this proved to be true in a

few instances both here and at peer schools, as you will see in our takeaways below, there were also reassuring trends. Specifically, our marks around the support and care we provide students and the sense of fun both increased while the time spent on homework decreased.

Support and Care

Menlo's strengths have long included our robust student support systems and the trusting relationships forged between our students and the adults on this campus. Across the School, student perceptions of teacher care and support received our highest scores ever. Our students overwhelmingly shared that they feel that they have people to turn to—both adults and peers—when they need them. Throughout the pandemic, we bolstered resources to support students during these challenging times, and we are pleased that those efforts helped us to make headway in this area.

- **Middle School:** Over 70% of our students feel they have a trusted adult at school they can go to if they have a personal problem, which is up from our last survey and slightly higher than peer schools. While ideally, we'd like this to be 100%, at this age, many students appropriately turn to their parents first when they need support. When they do seek out adults at Menlo, they are most likely to first reach out to one of their teachers, followed by a counselor, advocate, or coach (in that order). In addition to feeling a connection to their teachers, 87.2% of our middle schoolers also indicated that they have a friend at Menlo they could turn to with a problem.
- **Upper School:** There were also positive gains in this area. Specifically, 83% of students—a 10-point jump from 2018—told us they felt they had an adult on campus they could go to with a personal problem, and 92% of students reported they feel respected by their teachers. To be clear, this is not the experience of most high schoolers in our country, and we are proud that our commitments in these areas have made such an impact.

While there is always room for improvement and this work will never be complete, we are very pleased with the student feedback on support and teacher care. Those surely remain among our top strengths as a school.

Engagement, Challenge, and Fun

Promoting curiosity and a love of learning in our students are core to who we are as a school. We strive to provide students with dynamic learning experiences that are transformational, not just a transaction to be completed for a grade. Our engagement numbers had been trending up in surveys prior to the pandemic. This year, Middle School engagement numbers were nearly identical to 2018; however, similar to our peer schools, there was some decline at the Upper School level.

Thirty-three percent of 9th-12th graders, up from 26% in 2018, reported a feeling of going through the motions of schooling (“doing school”), and fewer indicated loving their learning. Similarly, 9% more high school students said the goal of school is to “get good grades” rather than to “master the material,” the latter of which is an indicator of full engagement. While we take this feedback seriously, we are cautiously optimistic that we will return to the positive trends we were seeing on these measures prior to the pandemic, especially after taking into account the shifts we had to make in our teaching methods and everything else our students’ endured over the past two years.

Another section of the survey asked students to describe Menlo in three words. One of the most common words students used across both the Middle and Upper School was “Fun”—it was second in the Middle School and third in the Upper School. This sense of fun is stronger at Menlo than at our peer schools. Our numbers across the school went up while many of our peers saw a decline. We are thrilled that Menlo continues to be a fun place for students!

A hallmark of Menlo includes a highly supportive and engaging program designed to appropriately challenge students, and these themes were also prominent across both divisions.

- **Middle School:** Students most commonly describe Menlo with words such as “Welcoming/Caring” and “Fun.” “Interesting/Engaging” and “Difficult/Stressful” rounded out the top descriptors. We were generally pleased to hear the students reaffirm aspects of the environment we seek to create in the Middle School.
- **Upper School:** For those in grades 9-12, “Challenging/Rigorous” was the most common descriptor at 47% (a decrease from 50% in 2018), “Difficult/Stressful” was second, “Fun” was third, and “Welcoming/Caring”



and “Interesting/Engaging” rounded out the top five. Ideally, we’d like to see an even distribution of the terms “Engaging,” “Challenging,” and “Fun,” but this year’s results weren’t quite as balanced as we’d like.

Balance, Well-Being, and Stress

As we have found in past surveys, our students across both divisions are simply not getting the recommended amount of sleep despite structural changes we made to the schedule five years ago to reduce homework and start school later.

- **Middle School:** Ten hours of sleep is recommended in early adolescence, and yet only 6.4% of our middle schoolers are getting 10 hours or more of sleep. On average, students in grades 6-8 get about 8.2 hours of sleep. Sixth graders sleep nearly nine hours and eighth graders get around 7.8 hours of sleep.
- **Upper School:** Pediatricians recommend about nine hours of sleep per night for those in grades 9-12, and only 5% of our students are reaching the recommended amount. Our high school students sleep about 7.2 hours a night on weeknights—freshmen sleep the most; seniors the least. While our students are getting more sleep than the national average of independent schools (6.9 hours), we’d like to see them get more rest.

Perhaps relatedly, more than 50% of Middle School students and 77% of our Upper School students say they sleep with their phones in their bedrooms. While many students say they use them as alarm clocks, Challenge Success identifies this habit as poor sleep hygiene: the blue light and the distraction disrupts and delays getting to sleep. As families, you can help by encouraging students to keep their phones outside of their sleeping area and use another type of alarm clock.

When asked specifically about homework, students indicated that the time they spend doing homework has decreased since 2018, which affirms our efforts in this area. Despite this favorable downward trend, our students are still balancing a lot.

- **Middle School:** Students report spending approximately 1.8 hours per night (weekdays and weekends) on homework. We are pleased to note that this number has decreased with each administration of the Challenge Success survey and is now in our optimal range for students. Additionally, nearly 60% of students shared that they felt this amount of homework was “Just Right.” Beyond their coursework, one-third of students reported working with an outside tutor. While this was the first time the survey asked this question, this is higher than we’d like. We hope students will turn first to their teachers and Menlo’s learning support resources when they need extra help.
- **Upper School:** Students report doing 2.7 hours of homework on weeknights and 3.4 hours over the weekends. Overall, students tell us their workload has decreased—it’s down from three weeknight and 3.6 weekend hours in 2016—and now sits in a range with which we are more comfortable. Despite this progress, there is still a perception from 55% of students that they have too much work (up from 43% in 2018). Calibrating the combination of academic load, the rigor of our program, and the well-being of our students has been of particular emphasis in the Upper School, and we’ve taken a number of steps to better balance these factors. The survey results showed some progress, and yet, this remains an area we continue to assess and monitor. New to this year’s survey data, we were surprised to learn that two-thirds of our students in grades 9-12 say they have additional *non-Menlo* homework, averaging 1.2 hours per weeknight and 1.9 hours per weekend—a concerning 44% addition to their workload. Anecdotally, students have shared that this extra work includes tutoring, SAT/ACT test prep, as well as supplemental classes outside of Menlo. This additional workload bears further examination as it may be contributing to students not getting enough sleep as well as their perception that they have too much on their plates.

Across both divisions, we continue to monitor our students’ workloads and are thoughtful about assigning homework that is meaningful and

not simply work for the sake of work. Families can help by encouraging students to reach out to their teachers for additional help as we recommend limiting outside courses and tutoring that may add to your child’s slate of homework.

One particular area of concern for us is that our students’ reported relatively high levels of “academic worry”, and this worry starts even before students enter 9th grade. Across both divisions, more than 70% of students identified their primary drivers of stress as meeting their parents’ expectations of academic excellence, getting good grades, busyness/too much work, and lack of sleep.

Challenge Success also asks students specifically about their perceptions of their parents’ expectations and their ability to meet those expectations.

- **Middle School:** 56% of students in grades 6-8 agree or strongly agree that their parents “set very high academic expectations” for them, and 57% of students feel they can meet their parents’ expectations often or always while 43% feel they can only sometimes or rarely meet them.
- **Upper School:** 71% of students report that their parents “set very high academic expectations” for them, and 73% say their parents “expect excellence” from them. Additionally, 60% of our students in grades 9-12 feel they can meet their parents’ expectations often or always; 37% feel they can only sometimes or rarely meet them; and 3% say they can never meet those expectations. Those numbers are consistent with results from previous years.

The pressure our students feel to achieve at a high level is real, especially in the upper grades. Menlo is working hard to help students see their time at the School as a transformational experience, not simply a transaction. For too many of our Upper School students, the drivers of their



stress and how they think about their time here are overly focused on school as a four-year audition for college. This has them convinced they must take the most challenging classes and make the highest marks, and thus they are more likely to view setbacks not as learning opportunities but as blemishes on their record. All of this, in our view, exacerbates the feelings of academic worry that are coming through in the survey results.

As parents and guardians, we hope you'll partner with us and talk to your children about sleep, balance, academic worry, busyness, and your own expectations for them. Families can help support the School's efforts by helping de-emphasize a focus on grades and transactional outcomes of school and focusing more on the process of learning, and for those in the Middle School, you can also emphasize the Habits of the Heart and Mind and Habits of Learning. Ask your student what excites them about their classes and have them share their thinking behind a project. Have them tell you about something new they've tried or how they overcame a challenge. Ask them to share how their learning connects to the School's mission, your family's values, or impacts the broader community.

Thoughts from Recent Graduates

Beyond Challenge Success, we also survey our seniors before they depart Menlo. We thought you might also like to hear some of their responses as they look back on their time at Menlo. We ask them to rate the School on how well we meet the aspirations of our mission statement (1 = strongly agree, 4 = strongly disagree), and their feedback is very inspiring. Fostering "positive, supportive student and teacher relationships," earned the highest marks for the first time, with all seniors agreeing that we achieved this goal. As noted above, we invested deeply in this part of our work through

the pandemic, and it is heartening to have students validate that effort. "An appreciation of diversity" and "leading a healthful life" have traditionally received lower marks when we survey students on the 11 elements of the School's mission, but this year, more than 80% of students agree—our highest numbers ever! Hearing from our graduates that we meet these goals is unequivocally good news.

In Closing

Despite completing this survey on the heels of a pandemic and expecting that the results would likely reflect the challenges of the past two years, the Challenge Success data offers several positive takeaways. Our investments in student care and support have had a meaningful impact, our students' workload has decreased in both divisions, and the sense of fun has increased. As noted, there are a few areas around student engagement, balance, sleep, and well-being that we will continue to monitor and work on. We have many support systems in place to promote well-being, and it's an area we've been ramping up throughout the pandemic. As shared in the [October Knightline](#), our current priorities include mapping out a strategic plan for mental health and well-being to support students in a post-pandemic era.

At its best, Menlo School is a partnership between dynamic, caring educators; curious, committed students; and dedicated, loving parents. We strive to provide an engaging, challenging, relevant, and fun academic program and a wide breadth of opportunities that will foster a love of learning and meaningful connections with caring teachers, advocates, and coaches. And in return, it is our hope that parents will partner with us to support these efforts and actively champion our mission and values.

Overall, Menlo—and its students—have emerged from the pandemic in a place of strength. And yet, as we often say, great schools are in a constant state of becoming, and there's always more we can do. Together, in partnership with you, we are well prepared to do this work. We thank you for your ongoing support and for entrusting us with your children.

Sincerely,

John Schafer
Upper School Director

La Vina Lowery
Middle School Director

Class of 2022 on the elements of the Mission Statement (127 responses)	Strongly Agree/Agree combined	Weighted Average
Positive, supportive Student and Teacher Relationships	100%	1.48
A quest for Academic Excellence	99%	1.49
Opportunities for Independent and Creative Thinking	98%	1.55
An Ability to Stretch Myself and Raise Challenging questions	98%	1.59
High Expectations Balanced with Encouragement and Support	94%	1.66
An Ability to Take on More Responsibility for my Life Decisions	96%	1.69
A Joy of Learning	92%	1.81
An Ability to demonstrate Courage, Integrity, and Ethical Behavior	89%	1.86
An Ability to Commit Myself to a Purposes Larger than Myself	90%	1.86
An Appreciation of Diversity	88%	1.89
An Ability to Lead a Healthful Life	84%	2.00

