august schools

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS · 2026

The Retention Advantage

How student wellbeing has become independent schools' most powerful competitive differentiator

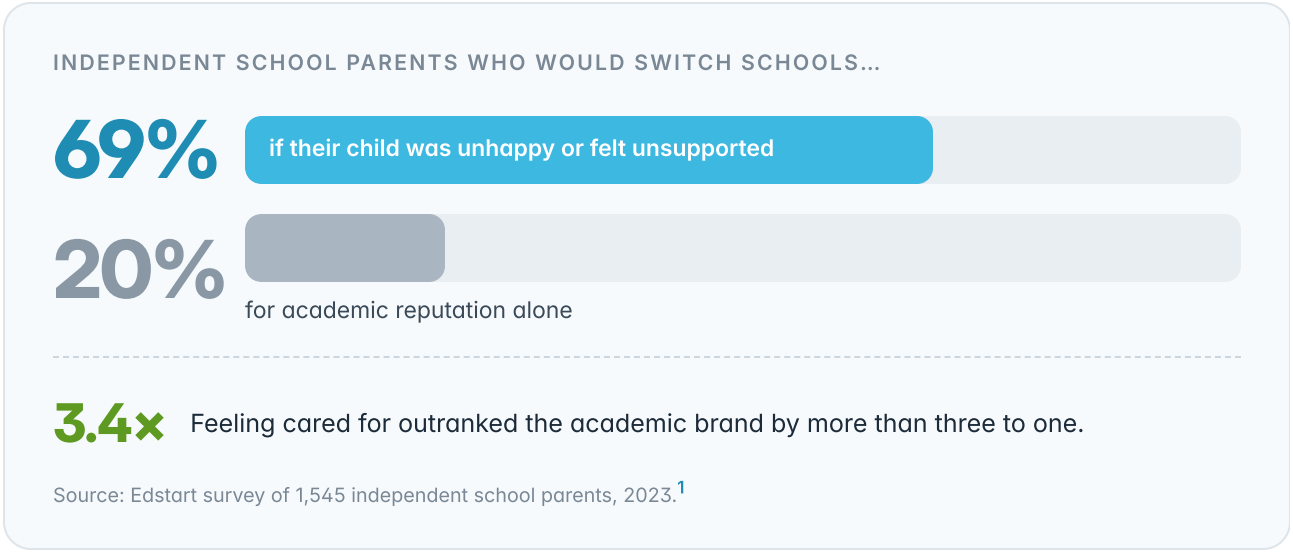
01 · THE SHIFT

The question families are asking

For most of independent school history, enrollment conversations centered on outcomes. College placement records. AP offerings. Athletic championships. Faculty credentials. Schools competed on credentials, and families chose accordingly.

That calculus has shifted. Families are still interested in academic rigor. But the question they ask first has changed. Before they want to know where graduates go to college, they want to know something simpler: **Will my child be okay here? Will someone notice if they are not?**

The data behind this shift is striking. A 2023 Edstart survey of 1,545 independent school parents found that 69% would switch schools if their child was unhappy or not well looked after, compared to just 20% who would switch for academic reputation alone.[1]



The thing most schools spend the most energy building and marketing, the academic brand, ranked behind feeling cared for by more than three to one.

This is not a marginal finding. It is a structural shift in what families are purchasing when they choose an independent school. And the schools that have not internalized it are building their recruitment strategy on an increasingly shaky foundation.

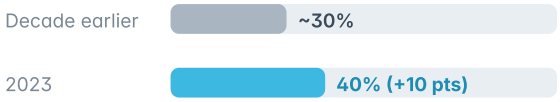
02 · THE CONTEXT

A mental health context that has raised the stakes

The urgency families feel around student wellbeing did not emerge in a vacuum. The past decade has produced a sustained and significant deterioration in adolescent mental health, one that independent school families are watching in real time.

40%

of high school students report persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, up 10 percentage points over the past decade.



CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2023.[2]

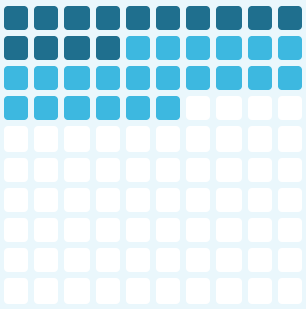
+61%

increase in diagnosed anxiety disorders among adolescents ages 12–17 between 2016 and 2023.

National Survey of Children's Health, 2024.[3]

Parents are not reading these statistics in the abstract. They are watching them play out in their homes, in their children's friend groups, in the conversations they have around the dinner table. When they choose a school, and when they decide whether to stay, trust in the school's ability to genuinely support their child is the primary variable.

A school that can answer that question credibly, with visible systems, not just good intentions, holds a meaningful advantage. One that cannot is exposed, regardless of its academic standing.



NAIS SCHOOLS, 2018–19 TO 2022–23

36% reported enrollment decreases

- 14% saw drops of 10% or more
- 22% saw smaller decreases
- Remaining schools

2023–2024 NAIS Trendbook.[4]

The schools experiencing attrition were not necessarily weaker academically. They were often schools that had not made a visible, credible commitment to wellbeing at the program and infrastructure level.

03 · THE PEOPLE

The talent and culture signal

Enrollment is only part of the story. Schools with underdeveloped wellbeing infrastructure tend to see the same dynamics in their faculty and staff.

Educators, counselors, learning specialists, deans, and advisors want to work in environments where their efforts actually reach students. Where a concern raised in one conversation travels to the right people. Where they can see the impact of the work they do. When that infrastructure is missing, even talented and committed staff begin to feel like they are doing heroic work with inadequate tools. Over time, they leave.

> **Caring and coordinating are two different things. Without the right infrastructure, even the most dedicated village is working with an incomplete picture.**

The school down the street with the growing enrollment is often not just attracting students from the school that is struggling. It is attracting the teachers and leaders too. Culture follows infrastructure. When the systems that support students are strong, the adults who support students want to be there.

04 · THE GAP

Where wellbeing programs break down

Most independent schools are not lacking in commitment to student wellbeing. They have invested in counselors, learning specialists, advisors, nurses, and SEL programs. The intention is present throughout.

What many schools are missing is coordination.

Supporting the whole student requires multiple adults: the nurse who manages health concerns and picks up on stress signals, the counselor tracking social-emotional patterns, the learning specialist watching how anxiety affects focus, the advisor who holds the family relationship, the

classroom teacher who sees her every day. Each holds a piece of the picture.

In most schools, those pieces remain in their silos. The counselor's notes do not surface to the nurse. The learning specialist does not know what the advisor already discussed with the family. When a student transitions from middle to upper school, the receiving team starts from scratch. When a family raises a concern, different adults are working from different versions of the story.

The result is wellbeing support that is well-intentioned but inconsistent, and that families eventually feel. Not as a crisis, usually. As a slow accumulation of moments where their child was not quite seen.

> **Not as a crisis, usually. As a slow accumulation of moments where their child was not quite seen.**

Research on student persistence points to a single factor that comes up consistently: whether a student has at least one trusted adult at school who knows her situation and shows up accordingly.[5] That relationship is not accidental. It is supported, or undermined, by the systems that allow adults to share context, notice patterns, and act before a situation escalates.

05 · THE PATTERN

A tale of two schools

Consider two schools that share a market. Both are academically strong. Both have caring, committed staff. One has spent decades building an academic reputation and has three counselors on staff. The other is known in its community for something different: for happy students, a robust advisory program, and a genuine school-wide emphasis on wellbeing. It has five counselors.

Over five years, the first school begins losing students, not dramatically, but consistently. A few families each year. When the dean tracks where those families are going, the answer is almost always the same school. The one known for happy kids.

And it is not just families leaving. Teachers are leaving. Leadership is leaving. Going to the school with the culture they want to be part of.

This story is not hypothetical. It is the pattern playing out across independent school markets in every region of the country. And the schools on the wrong side of it tend not to see it coming, because attrition looks like a retention problem long before anyone identifies it as a wellbeing problem.

> **Attrition looks like a retention problem long before anyone identifies it as a wellbeing problem.**

06 · WHAT WORKS

The schools that are getting it right

The schools growing enrollment and retaining students effectively share a set of operational practices that go beyond having the right people in place.

1

Shared documentation across roles

When a student is seen by the nurse for stress-related symptoms, that context is accessible to the counselor. When an advisor raises a concern, the care team can see what was shared and what follow-up was agreed upon. No adult is starting from scratch, and nothing is dependent on a hallway conversation to travel.

2

Whole-school signal systems

Every adult in the building is part of the early warning network, not just practitioners with clinical titles. The coach who notices a student has been unusually withdrawn. The teacher who sees something change in how a student sits in class. Those observations have a place to go, and they get there fast.

3 Structured handoffs across transitions

When a student moves from one division to another, or when a caseload changes, the context travels with her. The receiving team knows the arc of support, not just the most recent incident, before they ever walk into a family conversation.

4 Early pattern recognition

Attendance patterns, recurring health visits, changes in engagement: these signals become visible at the school level, not just to the individual adult who happened to notice. Intervention happens before the situation becomes a crisis.

5 Aggregate data for leadership

School leaders at these schools can speak to wellbeing outcomes with data, not just anecdotes. When they walk into a board meeting or a parent conversation, they have evidence of the work the team is doing and the impact it is having.

07 · THE ECONOMICS

The retention math

Wellbeing investment is sometimes treated as a cost center, a staffing and programming expense that lives outside the revenue model. The economics tell a different story.

A SCHOOL OF 400 STUDENTS AT $30,000 ANNUAL TUITION

5 students who don't re-enroll before high school × **$30,000** annual tuition × **4 yrs** of upper school enrollment = **$600,000** in lost revenue

Before accounting for:

- Recruitment costs
- Staff time on exit processes
- Class composition
- Financial aid budget

Families rarely cite academics when they leave an independent school. Exit interviews consistently return the same themes:

> The school did not notice their child's struggles.

> Concerns were not followed up on.

> The community admissions promised did not materialize in practice.

Wellbeing infrastructure, the kind that coordinates care across roles, surfaces early signals, and delivers a consistent family experience, is among the highest-return investments a school can make.

Reduces attrition	Generates the word-of-mouth that makes recruitment easier	Builds the institutional reputation no marketing budget can purchase

08 · WHAT'S NEXT

What this means for school leadership

The conditions defining this moment in independent education are not temporary. Adolescent mental health challenges are not receding. The generational shift in what families prioritize when choosing a school, belonging and support over brand and prestige, is structural, not cyclical.

The good news is that the schools best positioned to respond are the ones that have always believed in the whole child. The commitment is already there. What is often missing is the infrastructure to make that commitment visible and consistent, to ensure that the care the school's adults provide actually reaches every student, not just the ones who find their way to the right office.

That is a solvable operational problem. And the schools that solve it first will hold a durable advantage in their markets for years to come.

REFERENCES

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5 National Association of Independent Schools. *High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE): 2024 Trends Report.* Indiana University Center for Evaluation, Policy & Research, 2025.