

# When Doing It All Still Doesn't Feel Like Enough

A look inside the pressure shaping high-achieving students—and the mindset shift that can help

by *Stephanie Gilman*

On most weekdays, Elise Nguyen arrives at York House School by 7:30 a.m. Her day unfolds in a blur of classes, meetings, practices, tutoring, and evening programs that stretch well beyond dinner.

On Mondays, she heads to the school's yearbook club until 4:30 p.m., then teaches and tutors from 6 to 7. Tuesdays repeat the same schedule, with the addition of a philosophy class followed by competition math that finishes at 9:30 p.m. Wednesdays after school are reserved for debate meetings and public speaking classes. Thursdays and Fridays are long days packed with more classes and tutoring sessions.

On weekends, Elise often participates in debate tournaments—up to nine hours at a time—with writing class and debate practice scheduled late into the evenings.

"I think many kids at my school do a lot more than I do," she says casually.

Elise is in Grade 10 and her schedule would be daunting for most adults. But for her it feels normal—and expected.

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*Norah Kotler '29*



York House School sits within a broader ecosystem of high-performing independent schools across North America—communities that pride themselves on academic rigour, extracurricular depth, and preparing students for a wide range of future paths. But beneath the surface of impressive résumés and packed calendars, a quieter question is beginning to surface: what is the cost of constantly trying to do it all?

For Elise, that cost often shows up not in how busy she is, but in how she feels when the outcome doesn't match the immense time and effort she's poured into a subject or activity. "That's when I feel the most burned out," she says. "If I get good results, I feel pretty content. But if things don't go well, it's hard."

That emotional swing is far from unusual. Data from York House's 2024-25 Challenge Success Wellbeing Survey shows that 76 per cent of students in Grades 8 to 12 now report high levels of academic worry—a ten per cent increase from the previous year. Grades and assessments are the top reported source of stress, followed closely by future plans and overall workload.

On average, students report spending 2.5 hours per day on homework throughout the week, and 3.5 hours on weekends—before factoring in non-school academic work like test prep and enrichment

programs. And more than half of surveyed students say they've had to drop an activity they enjoy because they are too busy.

Elise recognizes that academic pressure immediately. Last year, while preparing for AP exams, she often spent long stretches of time studying alone in the library. "I would just lock myself in," she says.

She explains that she often has to give up socializing and activities simply to keep up. "I see my friends at tournaments or fundraisers," she adds. "We integrate our social lives into our academic lives. I did go to the mall with a friend during November break, but we don't go on the weekends—we're all extremely busy."

Elise didn't grow up in Vancouver. She moved to the city from Saskatchewan in Grade 8, after attending public school. That shift, she says, was eye-opening.

"There's a lot more comparison here," she explains. "The culture is very intense. A lot of parents make their kids take extra classes and extracurriculars with the intention of getting into a good university."

Social media only intensifies that pressure. Elise says her peers regularly post academic results and achievements on their social accounts, and many teens her age even maintain LinkedIn profiles where they share updates about their accomplishments.

“We’re friends, but we’re also competing,” she says. “You see what others are doing and you feel pressure to do the same.”

When the pressure feels like too much, Elise tries to step back in small ways. Sometimes she takes a walk, or asks for a break from class if she’s really overwhelmed. “My teachers are very kind and understanding,” she says. “And my friends get it, even if we don’t talk deeply about what we’re going through.”

Sarah Bennison has spent more than thirty years working in education and says stories like Elise’s are becoming increasingly common. She now teaches at New York University and co-founded The Mattering Movement, a nonprofit focused on fostering belonging and wellbeing in school communities. Bennison says these patterns reflect a wider cultural shift unfolding across high-achieving schools.

“We’re seeing a significant rise in what researchers call ‘socially prescribed perfectionism,’” Bennison explains. “That’s the sense that your worth is defined by how others perceive you—and it’s being fueled heavily by social media.”

According to Bennison, anxiety is now the most common emotional experience reported by students in high-achieving environments. It often shows up as avoidance, burnout, or a “zero-sum mindset,” where anything less than perfection feels like failure. “If students feel they can’t do something perfectly, they start to believe it’s not worth doing at all,” she says.

Underlying that mindset is what Bennison calls “contingent mattering,” the belief that one’s value depends on external achievements. “Mattering is



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**SARAH BENNISON**

about recognizing that your worth is inherent and unchanging,” she explains.

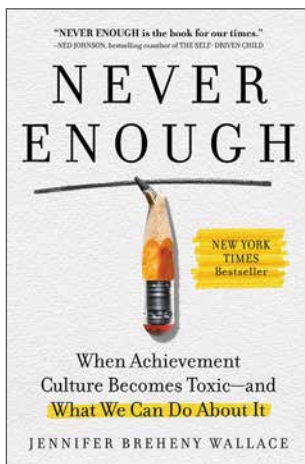
In her own work, Bennison has seen how shifting away from performance-based value can transform students’ wellbeing. Years ago, she created the Trinity School (NYC) Office of Public Service—a service learning initiative that connected students with meaningful community work on a weekly basis. The program was ungraded, non-competitive, and rooted in contribution rather than credentials.

“The students were being relied on to add value in meaningful ways,” Bennison says. “They kept telling me about the profound mental health benefits like lower stress levels, recognizing gifts they didn’t know they had, developing critical leadership skills, and feeling more connected and less isolated. It was ‘mattering’ in action.”

Much of today’s achievement culture, Bennison notes, is driven by parental anxiety—not by a desire to push

children unfairly, but by fear of what happens if they don’t keep up. With the top colleges and universities now highly competitive, parents can unintentionally steer their children into pressure-cooker environments, worried they might otherwise fall behind.

Jennifer Wallace—Bennison’s co-founder at The Mattering Movement and the author of *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic—and What We Can Do About It*—situates that fear within a broader economic and cultural shift. As financial precarity has grown and social safety nets have weakened, many parents have come to see elite education as a form of protection, making it difficult to step back from high-achievement norms even when the pressure is harming their children.



In *Never Enough*, Wallace explores what that pressure can do to children emotionally. “When we talk about pressure, perfectionism, anxiety, depression, and loneliness in kids,” she writes, “what we are really talking about is an unmet need to feel valued unconditionally, away from the trophies, the acceptance letters, the likes, and the accolades.”

Instead, Wallace urges families to offer a counterweight to achievement culture at home. “Make home a ‘mattering haven’,” she writes. “Because our kids are bombarded with messages on the importance of achievement, home needs to be a safe place to land, a place where their mattering is never in question.”

York House School’s leadership team has observed many of these same patterns. In a message shared with the community, Head of School Deryn Lavell reflected on how students today are often too overwhelmed and stretched to fully absorb their learning or develop critical life skills.

“They are tired and in some cases not sleeping, stressed, and worried about disappointing everyone,” Lavell wrote. “It becomes less about the joy of learning, making meaning, building friendships, and relishing some time to just ‘be.’”

The Challenge Success Survey data echoes that reality. Only 10 per cent of Senior School students say they feel they can always meet parental expectations, while nearly 40 per cent say they sometimes, rarely, or never meet them.

York House has also taken steps to respond to these dynamics by creating more balance in students’ days. Across both the Junior and Senior Schools, there is a focus on building life skills like resilience, empathy, and curiosity, alongside structural changes such as a later start time on Friday mornings for students in Grades 8–12.

In the Junior School, homework is intentionally limited to protect downtime, family connection, and healthy sleep routines, while co-curricular offerings are balanced by age. In the Senior School, students receive guidance from University Admissions Counsellors around course loads and extracurricular commitments, and Student Success Centres in both schools help students with their social, emotional, and learning needs. York House also works closely with parents and guardians through Coffee Talks and workshops with leading experts, helping families better navigate the pressures facing young students.

“This is where it is so important for parents to be in close partnership with teachers and school leaders,” says Lavell. “When the parents, student, and school are working together, we can create learning pathways that are unique to what each student needs.”

For Elise, the idea of separating self-worth from outcomes resonates.

“It’s the biggest downside of achievement culture,” she reflects. “Sometimes you might not get a perfect result because of bad luck, but we take it so personally. It’s hard not to care as much as we do.”



Bennison says that the same culture of competition and pressure extends beyond the classroom into youth sports. She points to the growing trend of early specialization—with children committing to a single sport at increasingly young ages—as another expression of the zero-sum mindset shaping academics. The result, she notes, is that families often find themselves making sacrifices that run against their own core values: “Many parents value family time, but the schedules required can mean giving up time spent together.”

Rather than asking families to abandon ambition, Bennison hopes that by introducing the mattering framework and sharing research, parents can be supported in making small shifts—inviting children

to contribute, naming their inherent strengths, and making space for connection that isn’t tied to performance.

Research shows that students who feel they matter often experience greater wellbeing and stronger academic engagement, and that even small acts, like holding a door for someone, can boost happiness and a sense of belonging. At NYU, Bennison gives every student a role—such as being a greeter when classmates enter the room—not as busywork, but as a way to build pride and ownership.

“I always take time to foster connection in the classroom and prioritize mattering,” she says. “Even if they don’t learn as much, they learn better.” 🌀

## SOMETIMES LESS IS MORE

### WHAT YHS IS DOING TO REDUCE ACADEMIC PRESSURE

Stanford University’s Challenge Success 2024-25 survey of York House students revealed two contributing factors reduce academic worry: a sense of belonging and confidence in coping. Much of the work YHS is doing to reduce academic pressure is designed to help students feel they belong while teaching them skills to build resilience:

**WEEKLY PROGRAMMING** to build the life skills of agency, resilience, curiosity, empathy, self-awareness, and collaboration

**SCHEDULING A LATE START**  
at 9:20 a.m. on Friday for Grades 8-12

**MINIMIZING HOMEWORK IN THE JUNIOR SCHOOL** to ensure students have ample time in the evening to relax, connect with family, and maintain consistent bedtime routines

**WE TRACK STUDENT EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES** while advising them not to overload their schedule

**WE BALANCE THE AMOUNT OF BEFORE AND AFTER SCHOOL CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES** in the Junior School for different age groups

**UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS COUNSELLORS work with Senior School students** to identify the optimal course load for their unique needs

**STUDENT SUCCESS CENTRES** in both Junior and Senior School to support the student’s social, emotional, and unique learning needs

**INTENTIONAL PROMOTION OF POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADULTS AND MENTORS** through homeroom teachers in Junior School and teacher advisors in Senior School

**COFFEE TALKS for parents and guardians** to equip them with tools to support their children’s learning and wellbeing

**WORKSHOPS for students, faculty, parents, and guardians with renowned experts:**

- *The Pressured Child: Helping Your Child Find Success in School & Life* with Dr. Michael Thompson
- *Under Pressure: Stress and Anxiety in Girls* with Dr. Lisa Damour