

# National survey: Students' feelings about high school are mostly negative

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Ask a high school student how he or she typically feels at school, and the answer you'll likely hear is "tired," closely followed by "stressed" and "bored."

In a nationwide survey of 21,678 U.S. high school students, researchers from the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and the Yale Child

Study Center found that nearly 75% of the students' self-reported [feelings](#) related to school were negative.

The study, which appeared in the January edition of the *Learning and Instruction*, also involved a second, "experience sampling" study in which 472 [high school students](#) in Connecticut reported their feelings at distinct moments throughout the school day. These momentary assessments told the same story: High school students reported [negative feelings](#) 60% of the time.

"It was higher than we expected," said co-author and research scientist Zorana Ivcevic. "We know from talking to students that they are feeling tired, stressed, and bored, but were surprised by how overwhelming it was."

Students were recruited for the survey through email lists of partner schools and through social media channels from nonprofits like the Greater Good Science Center and Born this Way Foundation. The students represent urban, suburban, and rural school districts across all 50 states and both public and private schools. The researchers found that all demographic groups reported mostly negative feelings about school, but girls were slightly more negative than boys.

"Overall," said co-author Marc Brackett, "students see school as a place where they experience [negative emotions](#)."

In the first online survey, students were asked to "think about the range of positive and negative feelings you have in school" and provide answers in three open text boxes. They were also asked to rate on a scale of 0 (never) to 100 (always) how often they felt 10 emotions: happy, proud, cheerful, joyful, lively, sad, mad, miserable, afraid, scared, stressed and bored.

In the open-ended responses, the most common emotion students reported was tired (58%). The next most-reported emotions—all just under 50%—were stressed, bored, calm, and happy. The ratings scale supported the findings, with students reporting feeling stressed (79.83%) and bored (69.51%) the most.

When those feelings are examined with more granularity, said Ivcevic, they reveal something interesting. The most-cited positive descriptions—calm and happy—are vague.

"They are on the positive side of zero," Ivcevic said, "but they are not energized or enthusiastic." Feeling "interested" or "curious," she noted, would reveal a high level of engagement that is predictive of deeper and more enduring learning.

She added that many of the negative feelings may be interrelated, with tiredness, for example, contributing to boredom or stress. "Boredom is in many ways similar to being tired," she said. "It's a feeling of being drained, low-energy. Physical states, such as being tired, can be at times misattributed as [emotional states](#), such as boredom."

The researchers noted that the way students feel at school has important implications in their performance and their overall health and well-being. "Students spend a lot of their waking time at school," Ivcevic said. "Kids are at school to learn, and emotions have a substantial impact on their attention. If you're bored, do you hear what's being said around you?"

Public attention has turned recently to early start times for high schools in the U.S. and how that contributes to sleep deprivation among students, which is associated with a number of other health risks—including weight gain, depression, and drug use—and poor academic performance. The American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended that high

schools start at 8:30 a.m. or later, but the vast majority start earlier.

"It is possible that being tired is making school more taxing," Ivcevic said, "so that it is more difficult for students to show curiosity and interest. It is like having an extra weight to carry."

Unfortunately, she added, decisions about school start times are often not made with students' health and wellbeing in mind. "There has been a movement in recent years to move [school](#) start times later," she said. "The reasons for not moving it have nothing to do with students' wellbeing or their ability to learn." Instead, these decisions are often driven by concerns about athletic programs, extracurricular activities, and transportation.

At the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, where Brackett is founding director and lead developer of RULER, an evidence-based approach to social and [emotional](#) learning, the goal is to give students and staff the tools to use their emotions wisely. RULER doesn't claim to prevent tiredness and boredom, but it is designed to help students to find an outlet for their feelings and to support teachers and students in developing emotion skills to promote greater engagement and enhance academic performance.

**More information:** Julia Moeller et al, High school students' feelings: Discoveries from a large national survey and an experience sampling study, *Learning and Instruction* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.learninstruc.2019.101301](#)

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