

Teen Roundtable Conversations

What Teenagers Need vs. What Schools Give

Insight Report by ADF Consulting

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ADF Consulting hosted a confidential Teen Insight Roundtable with 18 teenagers and 4 adult observers. These weren't just any students. They were strategically invited from over 12 schools, spanning boarding and day, public and private, boys and girls, and across junior and senior secondary levels.

This wasn't a survey. It was a safe space.

The number was also kept moderate to ensure they felt seen, heard, and our conversations were in-depth.

And once they felt warmly welcomed, they felt safe enough to speak, and what emerged was consistent, unfiltered, and hard to ignore.

The insights in this report are not presented as statistical generalizations. They are a first signal—an honest mirror held up to school systems from the perspective of those who experience them daily.

If schools continue to prioritize academics and control over connection, we risk raising students who perform well on paper but leave school disconnected from themselves, their peers, and their potential.

INSIGHT THEMES

1. The Emotional Climate of School Is Draining

Common words used: "Exhausting," "Tiring," "Demanding," "Repetitive," "Stressful."

"School is just tiring. It wears you out emotionally." — Teen Participant

"You get punished for scoring 8/10, but if a kind teacher gives you 6/10, you feel more supported."

— Teen Participant

Implication: Students associate school more with emotional depletion than personal growth.

2. Warmth Is Scarce. Expectations Are Not.

When asked to describe their teachers:

"Some are just repetitive and mid."

"They expect so much and keep pushing, but don't notice when we're struggling."

"Only a few are actually warm or relatable."

What made great teachers stand out?

"They're funny, interactive, relatable."

"They genuinely care and help you when you're down."

Implication: Emotional tone is everything. The best learning happens when connection comes before content.

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3. Rulebook Leadership Lacks Resonance.

“They just follow policy and don’t listen.”

“They don’t understand where we’re coming from.”

Implication: Students perceive school leadership as punitive, policy-driven, and emotionally unavailable.

4. Peer Culture Is Powerful and Often Undermining.

“You come in as a good child and come out completely changed.”

“Most people are disobedient. Peer pressure is real.”

Implication: If left unchecked, peer influence becomes the dominant shaping force, more than parents or school.

5. Safety Scores Are High—But Emotional Safety Is Fragile When scoring their school’s safety out of 10:

- Ranged between 7 and 8.5
- Many said they feel safe physically, but not always emotionally.

“Sometimes, you’re just not heard. Especially if you’re wrongly accused.”

“It’s not unsafe. But you don’t always feel secure.”

Implication: Safety must be redefined to include emotional wellbeing and the right to be heard.

6. Parents Often Don’t See the Full Picture

“My parents think teachers are always right.”

“They don’t know what really goes on.”

“Even teachers curse, and no one reports it.”

Implication: There’s a gap between what teens experience and what their parents believe is happening.

7. Schools Prioritize Academics Over Wholeness

What do students enjoy most?

“Social events, sports, competitions, and when there’s only one class.”

“Saturday is the best part of the school week.”

What stresses them most?

“Exams.”

“Repeating the same thing over and over.”

“Subjects that don’t make sense for the future.”

Implication: Academic excellence is being pursued at the cost of joy, creativity, and identity development.

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QUANTITATIVE INSIGHTS

- 89% described school as tiring, stressful, or emotionally draining
- Only 16% said they had more than 3 warm, supportive teachers
- 100% said peer pressure is hard to resist and deeply influential
- 78% felt school leadership does not listen to or act on student feedback

PARENTAL GAPS IDENTIFIED

- ◆ Many parents assume the school is right and don't investigate deeper
- ◆ Teens want their parents to advocate for their emotional well-being, not just grades
- ◆ Schools rarely communicate the soft issues or minor conflicts that shape student experiences

TEENAGERS' RECOMMENDATIONS

- More extracurriculars—sports, dance, robotics, drama
- Teachers who listen, not just instruct
- Softer discipline and fewer assumptions
- Classes that are engaging, not just theoretical
- A school environment that feels fun and human

“We need someone who listens, not just someone who gives rules.”

“Make the environment friendly. Right now, it feels like teachers think we're toxic.”

“Some teachers act like they just don't like you from day one.”

“Add more clubs. That's how we grow—not just through exams.”

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ADF CONSULTING'S SIGNATURE 6-POINT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOLS.

1. Reframe School Leadership
Equip school heads to lead with emotional intelligence and presence, not just policy. Leadership must resonate, not just regulate.

2. Audit the Teacher-Student Experience
Evaluate relational tone, not just lesson delivery. What students feel in class matters as much as what they learn

3. Track Peer Culture—It Shapes More Than Policy:
Peers shape identity more than policies do. Without systems to track and respond to peer influence, schools risk outsourcing student formation to hallway dynamics.

4. Restore Rhythm Within the School Day
Academic rigor without space for reflection, creativity, and emotional reset breeds burnout. The school timetable must balance performance with pause. Sometimes that pause is how we make students feel—seen and not overwhelmed.

5. Bridge the Gap Between Home and School
Parents aren't disengaged—they're often under-informed. Build systems that sync emotional insight with academic reporting, and invite parents into real-time awareness.

6. Reposition Academics as a Human Development Platform.
Subjects aren't just for grades. Classrooms should develop values, critical thinking, and identity.

At ADF, we help schools shift from Subject Classrooms to Life Classrooms— where content such as school subjects becomes the tool, not the goal.

The difference between teaching well and transforming lives is strategy. That's the work we do.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS

- Ask better questions—“What stressed you out today?” not just “How was school?”
- Don’t assume silence from school equals success
- Reinforce values at home and advocate for wholeness, not just grades.

CONCLUSION: WHAT’S AT STAKE

Teenagers are not machines programmed for grades. They are layered, growing humans—navigating pressure, comparison, identity, and the desire to be seen. This roundtable made one thing clear:

- ✦ A student can be excelling and emotionally drowning at the same time.
- If schools—and parents—fail to evolve, we risk raising competent but disconnected adults.

ABOUT ADF CONSULTING

ADF Consulting equips schools, families, and communities with tools, audits, and systems that empower teenagers to thrive. We believe emotionally secure teens lead to thriving societies.

📄 Download this report and more at:

[\[www.adfconsulting.co/resources\]](http://www.adfconsulting.co/resources)

🎯 Next Step? Invite ADF to conduct a Teen Insight Roundtable or Full Ecosystem Audit in your school.