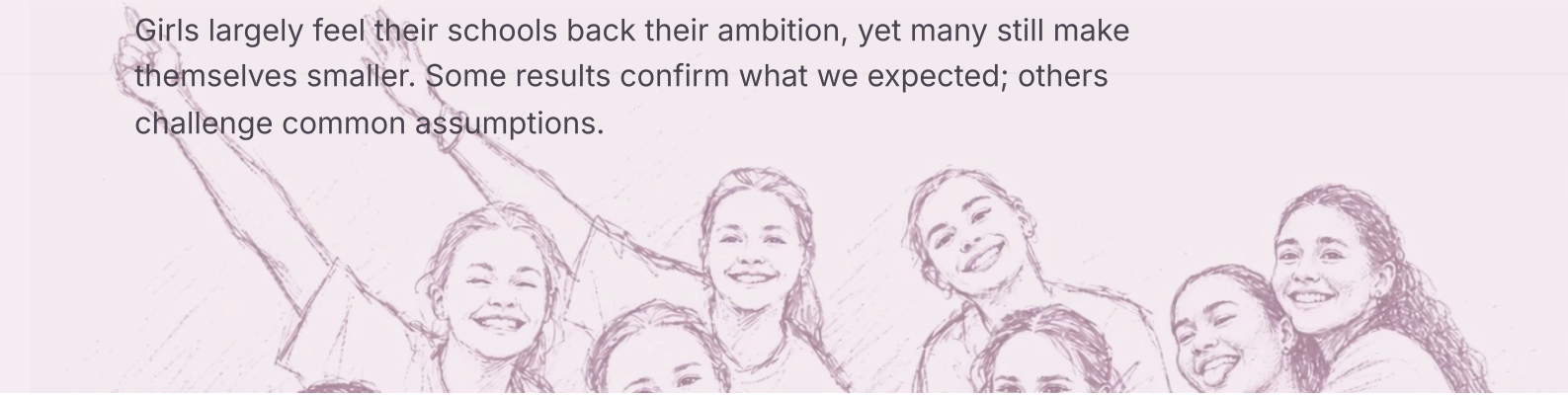
RESEARCH FINDINGS · 2026

Key Findings

What New Zealand girls told us about ambition, confidence and the culture of their schools.

Girls largely feel their schools back their ambition, yet many still make themselves smaller. Some results confirm what we expected; others challenge common assumptions.



SNAPSHOT

1. **Girls feel encouraged to be ambitious, but many still hold themselves back.**
   72% say their school encourages them, yet 54% make themselves seem less ambitious than they are.
2. **Confidence in girls is read as arrogance, and girls shrink themselves in response.**
   Ambition girls see as natural in boys gets labelled bossy or arrogant in girls, and girls who see this are four times as likely to downplay their ambition.
3. **Grade pressure is harming girls' wellbeing in every kind of school.**
   70% say it affects their wellbeing, at the same rate in co-ed and single-sex schools.
4. **Girls fear failure for what it says about their ability and how they look to others.**
   Around two-thirds fear they lack talent or worry what others think when they fail.
5. **When schools treat failure as normal, girls doubt their ability less.**
   Fear of lacking talent falls from 74% to 51% where girls say failure is treated as part of learning.
6. **Single-sex schools do more to make girls' ambition feel welcome.**
   86% of single-sex respondents feel they can be ambitious and accepted, against 48% at co-ed schools.
7. **Girls at single-sex schools are twice as confident sharing ideas in class.**
   73% feel confident sharing ideas, against 35% of girls at co-ed schools.

About the research

Anonymous survey of 104 girls aged 15–18 at New Zealand secondary schools, July–October 2026. Percentages are the share of all respondents who agreed or strongly agreed.

nosmallambition.org.nz

A student-led research project
Advised by Prof. Sarah Hetrick

WHO WE SPOKE TO

104 girls at New Zealand secondary schools

Girls aged 15–18 took part in an anonymous, voluntary survey between 29 July and 14 October 2026. Most were in senior years, over half were taking the International Baccalaureate, and almost two-thirds came from migrant families.

Co-ed and single-sex schools



Co-ed school	58%
Single-sex school	42%

Age



15	12%
16	23%
17	36%
18 or older	30%

International Baccalaureate (IB)



Currently taking IB	55%
Planning or considering IB	5%
Unsure	15%
Not considering IB	25%

Born in New Zealand or overseas



Born overseas	27%
NZ-born, a parent born overseas	37%
NZ-born, parents NZ-born	36%
Prefer not to say	1%

Were you, or either of your parents, born in a different country?

Percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding. School type was added partway through the survey, so it covers about half of respondents; all 53 were taking the IB.

How the survey was run

No Small Ambition is a student-led research project asking why capable girls sometimes hold themselves back academically, and what school structures help them step forward. The survey was anonymous and voluntary, and girls could skip any question. The fear-of-failure questions use a validated measure (the PFAI-S), so results can be compared with published research.

Limits to keep in mind

- Girls chose to take part, so the results describe this group, not every New Zealand student.
- With about 100 respondents, percentages carry a margin of roughly ±10 points.
- Links between answers show associations, not cause and effect.
- The co-ed and single-sex comparison covers 53 girls, all IB students.

KEY FINDINGS

Further detail

How to read the numbers. Statements were rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree); fear of failure was rated 0–100, with 75 or 100 counted as agreeing. Percentages are the share of all respondents who agreed, so neutral answers stay in the total. Where it matters, charts show agree, neutral and disagree separately.

1 Girls feel encouraged to be ambitious, but many still hold themselves back

Most girls say their school encourages ambition (**72%**) and that caring about academic success is accepted among their peers (**73%**). Yet more than half make themselves seem less ambitious than they really are, and nearly half downplay their success around friends.

Feeling encouraged made no difference: girls who felt encouraged held back about as often as those who didn't.



Why it matters: encouragement alone does not stop girls holding back. The pressure to appear less ambitious comes from somewhere else, so schools need to look beyond their messaging.

2 Confidence in girls is read as arrogance, and girls shrink themselves in response

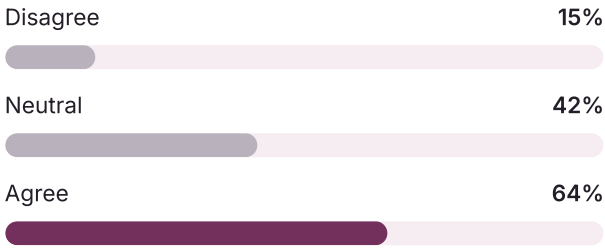
69% say confidence in girls is sometimes mistaken for arrogance.

The double standard: in their own written comments, girls described the same ambition being judged differently by gender. In boys, ambition is “seen as natural”, “praised” or “celebrated”. In girls, it gets labelled “bossy”, “cocky”, “uptight”, a “know-it-all” or a “teacher's pet”. Several also said high achievement is simply expected of girls, while boys are praised for it.

Girls who recognise this double standard are four times as likely to make themselves seem less ambitious, the clearest link in the data between how girls are seen and how they act.

> *“Girls face intense pressure to be likeable and modest, whereas male ambition is seen as natural.”*

Make themselves seem less ambitious, by view on “confidence is mistaken for arrogance”



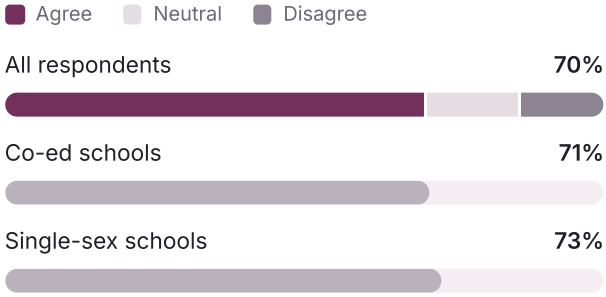
Why it matters: the labels girls hear (“bossy”, “uptight”, “teacher's pet”) have a cost. Challenging them is one of the most direct ways to help girls show their ambition.

3 Grade pressure is harming girls' wellbeing in every kind of school

70% say the pressure to achieve high grades affects their wellbeing, and 38% agree strongly. It is the most strongly held concern in the survey.

It was the same for girls in co-ed and single-sex schools, and did not change with age or whether girls were taking the IB.

Grade pressure affects my wellbeing

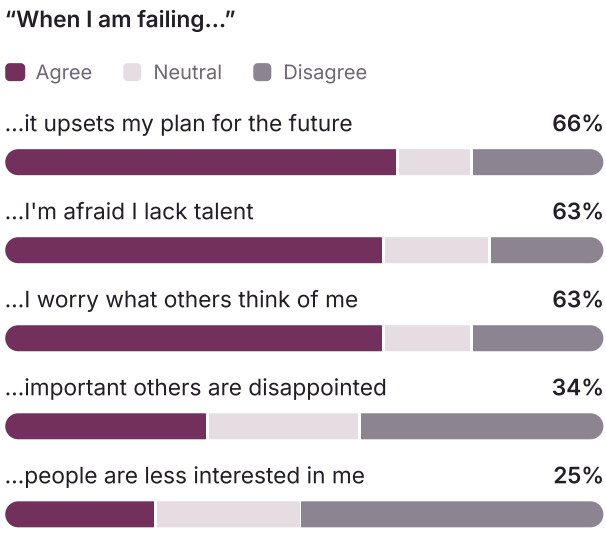


Why it matters: this is not a problem one type of school has solved. Every school needs to look at how assessment load and messaging add to the pressure.

4 Girls fear failure for what it says about their ability and how they look to others

When they fail, around two-thirds fear they lack talent, worry it upsets their plans, or worry what others think of them; 44% gave that last worry the maximum score. Far fewer think people lose interest in them.

The worry about others goes hand in hand with wellbeing: **85%** of girls who worry what others think say grade pressure affects their wellbeing, against **30%** of those who don't.

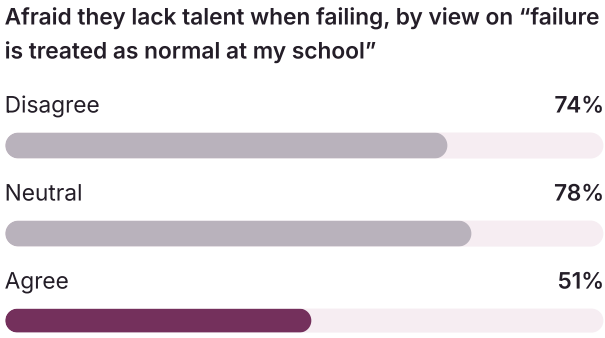


Why it matters: girls read setbacks as verdicts on their ability. Feedback that focuses on strategy and effort, not talent, speaks directly to this fear.

5 When schools treat failure as normal, girls doubt their ability less

Girls who say their school treats failure as a normal part of learning are much less likely to fear they lack talent when they fail. Only half of girls (**51%**) say their school does this today.

> *"Sometimes it's less scary to not try than it is to try and fail."*



Why it matters: this is the most actionable link in the data. School culture around failure is something schools control, and it is tied to how girls see their own ability.

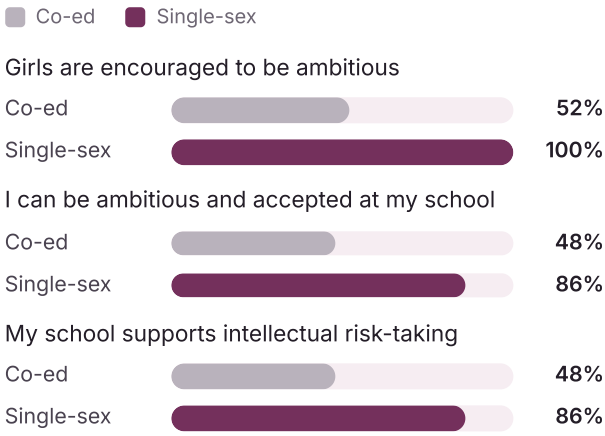
Single-sex schools change the climate, not the pressure girls carry

Girls at single-sex schools feel far more backed in their ambition and are more confident sharing ideas in class. But on the pressures girls carry inside, the two groups look much the same.

6 Single-sex schools do more to make girls' ambition feel welcome

Every girl at a single-sex school said girls there are encouraged to be academically ambitious, against half of girls at co-ed schools. The gap is just as clear on whether girls can be ambitious *and* accepted, and on whether their school supports intellectual risk-taking.

These are large, statistically significant differences, and they hold after allowing for the age of respondents.

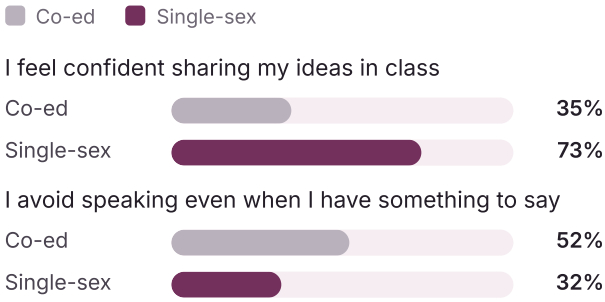


Why it matters: in co-ed schools, only half of girls feel their ambition is actively backed. Co-ed schools can borrow from single-sex settings by stating girls' ambition explicitly and creating girl-led spaces.

7 Girls at single-sex schools are twice as confident sharing ideas in class

Nearly three-quarters of girls at single-sex schools feel confident sharing their ideas in class, against about a third at co-ed schools. Girls at co-ed schools were also more likely to stay quiet when they had something to say (52% against 32%).

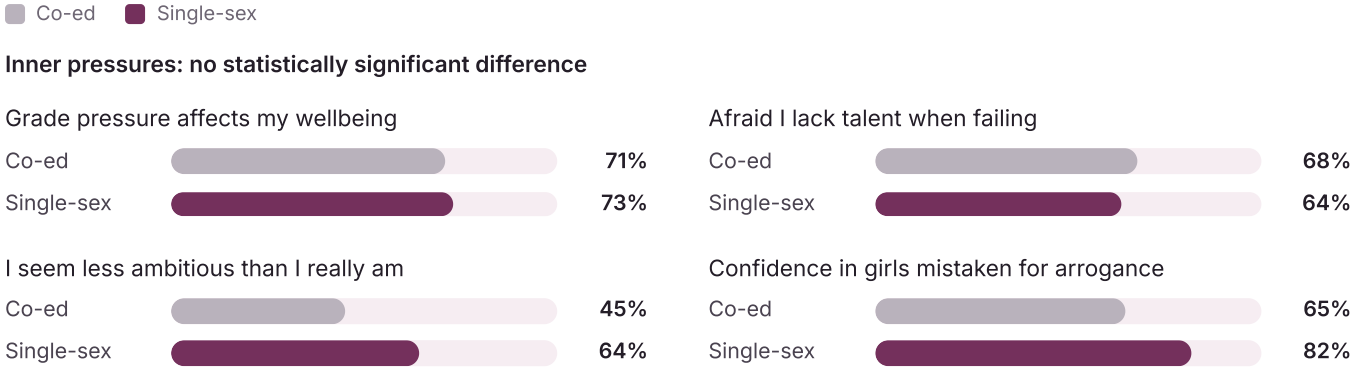
> *"If girls are being hesitant to add their input in class, forcing them to answer... won't help."*



Why it matters: classroom voice is where ambition becomes visible. In co-ed classes, structured ways to contribute (think–pair–share, written responses, warm calling) can close part of this gap.

Based on the respondents asked their school type, all IB students. The confidence gap is statistically significant when tested on its own and after allowing for age. The speaking-up gap while large is not statistically significant. This is a potential area for further research.

But the pressures girls carry look much the same



Even at single-sex schools, where every girl said they were encouraged, nearly two-thirds still make themselves seem less ambitious than they are. Single-sex schooling appears to change the environment and girls' voice in class, but not the pressures girls carry inside.

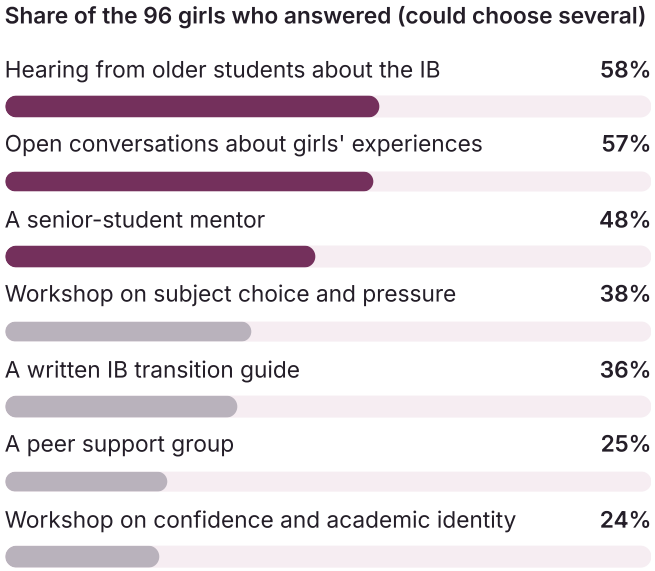
School type was asked of 53 respondents, all IB students. The school-climate differences in finding 6 are statistically significant and hold after allowing for age; the differences in this chart are not. Each group likely comes from a small number of schools, so school type cannot be fully separated from individual school culture.

WHAT GIRLS WANT

Girls ask for support from each other, not to be fixed

Asked which supports they would find helpful, girls chose peer-led and practical options first. The least popular choice was a workshop on confidence, suggesting girls see the problem in their environment rather than in themselves.

These preferences shape the next phase of the project and the **School Toolbox**, available at nosmallambition.org.nz.



CONFIRMING AND CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS

Some interesting themes emerged

Some findings reflect familiar patterns about girls and achievement. Others run against common assumptions, and may matter most for how schools respond.

Confident girls pay a likeability penalty.

69% say girls' confidence is mistaken for arrogance, and 54% make themselves seem less ambitious. Girls describe being called “bossy”, “uptight” or a “teacher's pet”.

Girls blame setbacks on a lack of talent, not effort.

63% fear they don't have enough talent when they fail, matching wider research on how girls explain their setbacks.

Academic success still ranks below sport and the arts.

57% say sporting or arts success is celebrated more than academic success; only 19% disagree.

Girls' achievement is expected, while boys' is praised.

In their own words, girls describe high achievement as simply expected of them, being told they are good at maths “for a girl”, and being steered away from maths and physics.

Trying hard is not seen as uncool.

73% say caring about academic success is accepted among their peers (5% disagree), and half reject feeling pressure to hide how hard they work. Only 32% feel that pressure.

The pressure comes from within, not from fear of losing friends.

Only 25% think people lose interest in them when they fail, and girls are split on whether failing disappoints important others. The weight is self-doubt and reputation.

Girls see the specific double standard more clearly than the general one.

Only 46% say ambitious girls are viewed differently from ambitious boys, with a third neutral, yet 69% say girls' confidence is mistaken for arrogance.

Girls don't see themselves as lacking confidence.

A confidence workshop came last among supports (24%). Girls would rather hear from older students (58%) and talk openly about their experiences (57%).

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

One-to-one interviews will explore why girls hold back and what would help. The School Toolbox turns these findings into practical steps for schools. Results are reported in aggregate and quotes are anonymised.

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