

**GAIL Research Fellowship**  
KIMBALL UNION ACADEMY, USA  
KRISTIN SCHOOL, NZ



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Kimball Union Academy 2019

## **PROJECT OVERVIEW**

### **Home school:**

**Kimball Union Academy**, Meriden, NH, USA

Age range: grades 9-12 & PG

Co-educational

Number of students: 342

### **Host school:**

**Kristin School**, Albany, Auckland, NZ

Age range: 2 years to Year 13

Kindergarten, Junior School (Yr 1 to 6), Middle School (Yr 7 to 10) and Senior School (Yr 11 to 13)

Co-educational

Number of students: 412 (JS), 652 (MS), 521 (SS)

### **Project overview:**

*How to identify anxiety risk factors and develop preventative and management strategies with teenage students. Globally, anxiety in people ages 15-24 is on the rise, and as societal factors intermingle with the demands of elite academic institutions, it is essential that faculty educate themselves on current support trends.*

*If we are to prepare our students for adulthood and help them keep up with our rigorous schedules, we need to communicate effectively and develop a culture of care. By teaching students and faculty about emotional intelligence and anxiety management, schools can enjoy more productive, healthy student bodies and faculty.*

### **The research aims to identify the following:**

1. How do the students understand their anxiety and the contributing factors in their development of anxiety?
2. What programs and infrastructures are in place at the Kristin School to help improve student anxiety, and do these programs have a beneficial outcome?
3. What are the challenges inherent in including emotional support programming in the daily or weekly curriculum?

### **Methodology**

Quantitative data was collected through Google form surveys distributed by teachers to students. Receipt of survey was usually preceded by a brief explanation of the purpose and a reiteration of the privacy policy in regards to sharing the results.

Qualitative data was collected through student focus groups, classroom observations, and interviews with administrators and faculty. Focus groups were composed of 3-7 students from the same class and grade level; gender and ethnicity were diversified in each group whenever possible. Groups were asked the same set of pre-written questions and their answers were audio recorded for later analysis.

## THE KRISTIN SCHOOL: AN OVERVIEW

The Kristin School, “one of New Zealand’s leading independent schools,” was founded in 1973 ([kristin.school.nz](http://kristin.school.nz)). As a non-denominational institution serving approximately 1585 students ages two to eighteen, the community is expansive yet purposeful in its commitment to consistent values. The school has offered the International Baccalaureate program for over twenty-five years; as Kristin’s reputation for excellence has grown, so too have application numbers, and the school now boasts a competitive acceptance rate.



Head Boy Joshua Philips and Head Girl Swati Puri help two of Kristin’s youngest community members light the Foundation Candle to celebrate the anniversary of Kristin’s founding.

Kristin’s student population is diverse, and while approximately half the students identify as Pakeha (of European descent), more than one-third identify as Asian, and around three percent identify as Maori or another Pacific Islander ethnicity ([educationcounts.govt.nz](http://educationcounts.govt.nz)). Many times during my travels on campus, I would hear a mix of languages spoken in the hallways. The school is also balanced in terms of gender, and the senior school is large and diverse. This school (years 11, 12, and 13) makes up about thirty-four percent of the total school population, though the equivalent of US freshmen (year 10), are included in the middle school. They make up about ten percent of the student population.

Kristin prides itself on its excellence in academics, arts, and sports; their facilities support this, as there are ample performing spaces, expansive athletic facilities, and advanced academic classrooms. Their motto is “Future Ready”, and they focus on “Progress with Vision, Integrity and Love” ([kristin.school.nz](http://kristin.school.nz)). Students in the senior school have a range of opportunities for leadership, including 9 committees into which students can be elected by their peers.

Since it serves all years at the school, the campus is large, with buildings grouped in clumps by their affiliation with the junior, middle, and senior schools. I enjoyed the large windows in classrooms and the clear focus on encouraging students to take advantage of outdoor time. The junior school is focused on play and dynamic stimulation, and the facilities reflect this approach. In the middle and senior school, large platforms in the outdoor common areas are available for eating, playing, and talking on, and during breaks you can find students tossing a rugby ball, enjoying the sunshine, or snacking in groups at picnic tables or on patches of grass.

## ADOLESCENT ANXIETY IN THE U.S. AND IN NEW ZEALAND

For the purpose of this enquiry, it is important to define anxiety and indicate how it manifests in a variety of symptoms. Staff at the Mayo Clinic explain that “. . . people with anxiety disorders frequently have intense, excessive and persistent worry and fear about everyday situations. Often, anxiety disorders involve repeated episodes of sudden feelings of intense anxiety and fear or terror that reach a peak within minutes (panic attacks)” (“Anxiety Disorders”). Lower-level anxiety is normal, say most clinical sources, and can even be beneficial. Anxiety often co-matures with intelligence, as sufferers develop a mental edge while evaluating possible and probable outcomes and inherent dangers. Anxiety in teens is also common, and the development of their brains, combined with their heightened hormone production, on average leads to levels of anxiety higher than those of adults (Friedman).

Despite the typical role anxiety plays in daily teen life, studies have shown that debilitating levels of anxiety in teens are on the rise. “Anxiety is the most common mental-health disorder in the United States, affecting nearly one-third of both adolescents and adults, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. But unlike depression, with which it routinely occurs, anxiety is often seen as a less serious problem,” says *New York Times* writer Benoit Denizet-Lewis. Perhaps because certain levels of stress or normal, teens and adults tend to write off incidents of chronic acute anxiety; while depression is often more noticeable, those people around an anxiety sufferer may not see the full extent of the symptoms or may be tempted to dismiss the visible symptoms as something someone should push past or get over. In the absence of a comprehensive therapeutic approach, the increasing numbers of American adolescents suffering from anxiety have been climbing: “Based on data collected from the National Survey of Children’s Health for ages 6 to 17, researchers found a 20 percent increase in diagnoses of anxiety between 2007 and 2012 . . . The data on anxiety among 18- and 19-year-olds is even starker. Since 1985, the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA has been asking incoming college freshmen if they ‘felt overwhelmed’ by all they had to do. The first year, 18 percent replied yes. By 2000, that climbed to 28 percent. By 2016, to nearly 41 percent” (Nutt). The feeling of being “overwhelmed” is a common element of adolescent life, and no place is this more prevalent than in the academic sphere. While the rates of anxiety in American teens have been manifestly rising, schools and government policies have been slow to tackle this threat to mental health.

As another member of the developed world, New Zealand has also seen spikes in adolescent anxiety levels. “A Ministry of Health report released in November [2017] contained an estimate that 79,000 young New Zealanders are in ‘psychological distress’, which means they have ‘high or very high probability of anxiety or depressive disorder’”, and this reported number, indicating 12% of the total population ages 15-24, was significantly higher than the 5% reported in 2011 (Woulfe). The New Zealand authorities have made it a priority to add this issue to their national agenda, and The Prime Minister’s Youth Mental Health Project was launched in 2010, and in addition to the PB4L School-Wide Support Approach, the Ministry of Health created the program “SPARX” ([sparx.org.nz](http://sparx.org.nz)). A “free online self-help e-therapy tool”, SPARX’s creation is an indication that there is a cultural dedication to helping teens identify and manage their emotions.

## **ACADEMICS AT KIMBALL UNION ACADEMY AND THE KRISTIN SCHOOL**

While KUA and the Kristin School are both academically challenging institutions, they offer different advanced courses to their students. Since many students report academics as one of the largest contributing factors to their anxiety, it is essential to delineate ways the course load may alter a student's anxiety level.

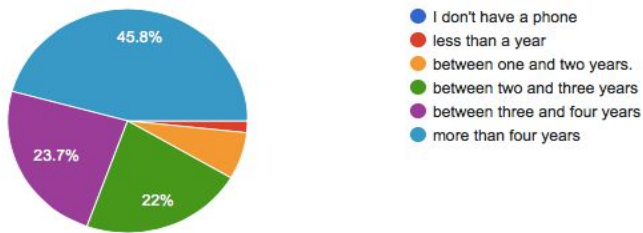
Kimball Union Academy subscribes to the AP program, meaning that students have the option to take an Advanced Placement course once they have fulfilled the prerequisites and maintained a high average in their previous classes in the subject. While most students are juniors and seniors (grades 11 and 12) when they take advanced courses, there are some students who are qualified to take an AP in as early as their sophomore year (grade 10). Since AP classes are individually optional, students who choose to take the "AP route" must balance their projected workload, keeping an eye on the steadily mounting hours dedicated to homework and assessments. KUA has recently announced that any student who takes an AP course must take the AP test, which means that if a student does not stay on top of their work and performance, they may fall behind on the rigorous end-of-year AP exam. APs are the most desirable course for a student when considering college applications, but misjudging one's aptitude could result in a lower GPA. In addition to the APs, KUA students can choose from college preparatory or honors courses, depending on their grades and their teachers' recommendations. Advisors, teachers, and administrators work together to try and help a student establish a manageable workload that will help them succeed. One sophomore (class of 2021) told me that it can be "really hard to balance doing what you love, doing what your parents want, and doing what the college advisor tells you to do. [It's] really stressful." Many KUA students enjoy feeling challenged and reflect positively on all they have learned and accomplished by senior year, but they frequently comment on how a difficult course load can affect their anxiety levels.

The Kristin School is equally as rigorous as Kimball Union Academy, though the programs which it implements are different. Students start their year 10 and 11 at the same level, learning progressively more complex concepts and techniques. By the beginning of their year 12, students must decide if they are taking the International Baccalaureate (IB) or the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) track. The NCEA is the main national qualification for secondary school students in New Zealand, while the IB is a global academic network that allows for streamlined communication of international standards of education. According to David Boardman, Principal of the Kristin School's Senior School, the IB program is incorrectly perceived as the more academic route; he asserts NCEA can get students into top universities as well. While the IB is more internationally recognized, with the NCEA, the students can choose the track they want and spread their workload out. The NCEA is modular, so it takes the pressure off students. This perception seemed to be reflected in my interviews with students; several year 12 IB students, when asked if their coursework caused them anxiety, told me that it was a demanding but manageable load. One year twelve said, "they prepare us by working us hard, so the test and even [university] aren't too tough. If I'm feeling overwhelmed, they're usually good about letting me take a break or get an extension." Other students commented on the feeling that they can't always get all their work done, but most students communicated that they felt their teachers and administrators were fairly flexible in their expectations.

## SOCIAL FACTORS THAT MAY CONTRIBUTE TO ANXIETY LEVELS

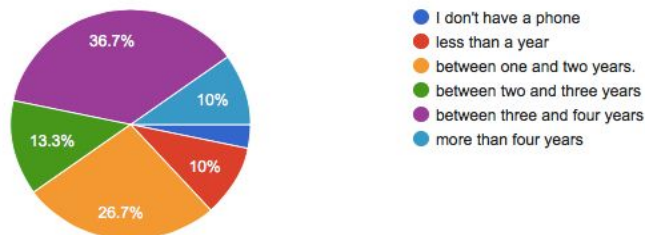
My first instinct when looking at the factors that contribute to anxiety was to look at the use of personal devices such as cell phones and iPads, generally referred to as “screen time”. After all, “Young people who spend seven hours or more a day on screens are more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression or anxiety than those who use screens for an hour a day, finds a new study published in the journal *Preventive Medicine Reports*” (Heid).

In a survey sent to sophomores at KUA and Year 11s at Kristin, I asked the question “How long have you had your own phone?”



**Figure 1**

The figure to the left is the response from 59 KUA sophomores, which indicates a large majority (roughly 80%) have had a phone for three or more years.



**Figure 2**

The figure to the left represents the 30 year 11s who responded, and it shows that only about half of the students have had a phone for three or more years.

It is clear that personal electronics use is more prevalent over time in the KUA community, but it should be noted that essentially all

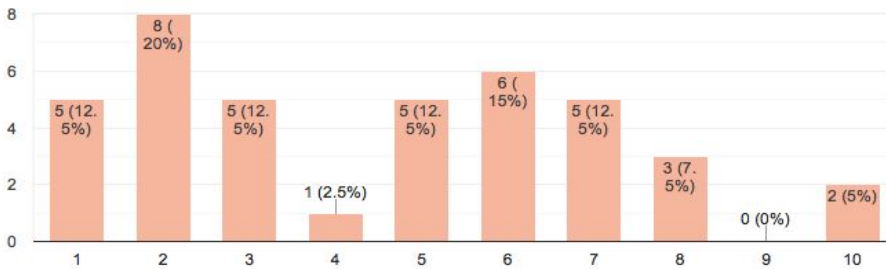
students who took the survey, from both KUA and The Kristin School, have a phone and use it frequently. In fact, the responses to social media and communication use questions were very similar between Kristin and KUA (70% use a mainstream app or texting), though KUA students prefer to use Snapchat while Kristin students use Instagram more frequently. The similarity in these results indicates that personal technology use, while clearly an influential part of students’ lives, is not so different among the KUA and Kristin communities to explain major differences in anxiety levels.

A crucial difference between KUA and The Kristin School is that Kristin is a day school, while KUA is a boarding school. Whether students have daily access to their parents presents its own set of benefits and challenges, but after speaking with KUA students, I found that the experience of boarding does not necessarily change a student’s anxiety level. One senior said, “I like to see my mom, but I don’t need to be home to be happy. I have friends here, and I have lots of teachers to hang out with if I need help with something.” The ease of modern communication also limits this effect, with texting, Facetime, and applications like WeChat allowing students to touch base with their parents frequently, no matter where they are located. Many Kristin students in smaller interview groups spoke about how they liked having their parents there to support them, but sometimes their parents had high expectations or were too busy to “be bothered” with the emotional needs of the student. The variety of student-parent relationships is so diverse that it’s not possible to definitively pinpoint anxiety levels being lower or higher based on

whether a student boards or commutes to school, so this aspect of the student experience can be eliminated as a causal element in the data.

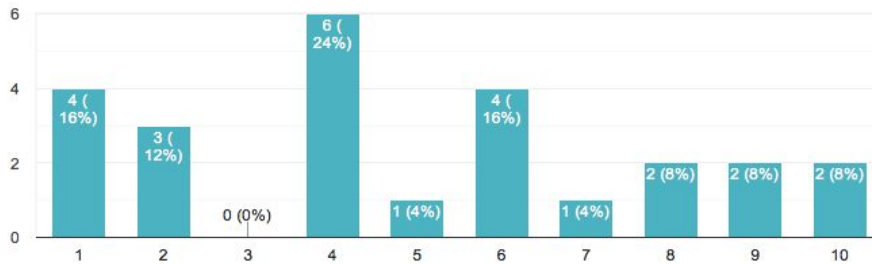
### REPORTED ANXIETY LEVELS AT KUA AND THE KRISTIN SCHOOL

The availability of classes and students at Kristin School, in addition to my frequent work with first years and sophomores at KUA, indicated that it would be best to primarily focus on those two age groups, with Kristin year 10s being the equivalent of KUA first years and Kristin year 11s being their KUA sophomore counterparts. By comparing similar age groups, particularly the progression and manifestation of their anxiety, it is easier to isolate key differences in the data.



**Figure 3**

The chart on the left indicates the responses of 25 KUA first years when asked “What would you rate your average level of anxiety, with 1 being not anxious (stressed/worried) and 10 being anxious all the time?”



**Figure 4**

The chart on the left indicates the responses of 40 Kristin School year 10s when asked the same question.

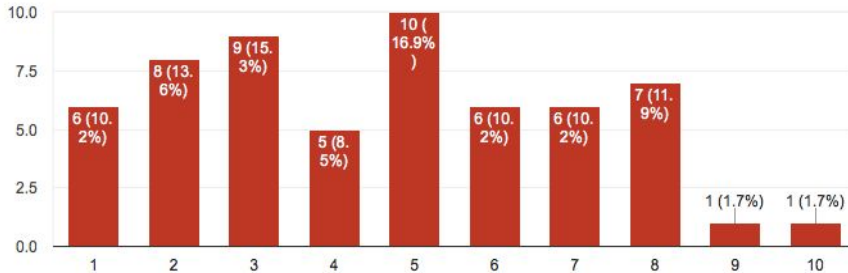
KUA’s first year anxiety levels tend to peak in the middle and lower end of the spectrum, whereas Kristin year 10s have close to a bell curve, with the majority hitting between a “4” and a “6”. Both groups are relatively spread out.

Responses in focus groups were similar; prior to each focus group, I clarified the difference between stress and anxiety, to ensure the students understood how anxiety is a severe, often debilitating experience. Both KUA students and Kristin students expressed that being busy is a social experience can raise or lower their anxiety level. Knowing what is coming next or what can be expected consistently surfaced in my conversations with both American and Kiwi students. One Kristin year 10 mentioned that not having a phone or watch while on the camping trip caused her anxiety, as she couldn’t keep a schedule or check in on what her friends were doing; similarly, a KUA first year spoke about how she would not engage in an activity until she knew when she could expect a distraction or notification from a friend. Her ability to be in the moment and limit her anxiety was reliant on knowing how long she’d be doing that activity and when she could expect to disengage from it.

On the other end of that spectrum, there are many younger students who do not experience severe anxiety and may in fact not attribute enough weight to their daily activities. One year 10 said he had some friends

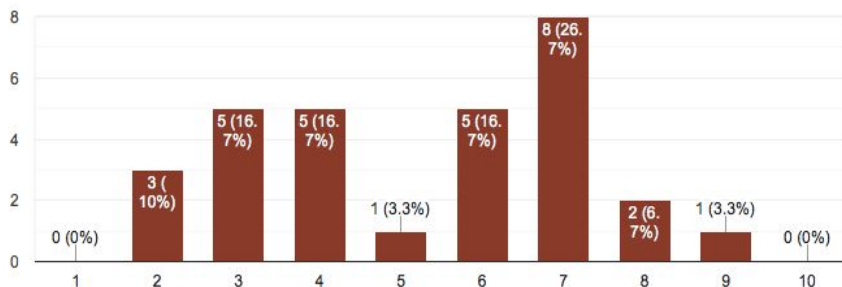


who didn't seem too anxious about their studies, even when they weren't doing well. A KUA first year said he didn't like being in group projects with students who didn't seem to feel anxious about the results. I did hear KUA first years mention sport more frequently in our conversations than Kristin students.



**Figure 5**

The chart on the left indicates the responses of 59 KUA sophomores when asked “What would you rate your average level of anxiety, with 1 being not anxious (stressed/worried) and 10 being anxious all the time?”



**Figure 6**

The chart to the left indicates the responses of 30 Kristin School year 11s when asked the same question.

The largest percentage for both groups has risen on the anxiety scale; however, the highest end of Kristin students has been alleviated somewhat. While KUA’s anxiety levels have evened out to more closely represent a bell curve, it should be noted that there are still significant numbers of sophomores who feel very little anxiety on a daily basis.

It did appear that Kristin students were more equipped to process and identify their own anxiety. In the focus groups, when asked “how do you know you are experiencing anxiety?” most of them were able to clearly cite physical, emotional, and social symptoms. At least half the students spoke of nausea, tightened jaw, or pain in the neck or shoulders. Many also mentioned needing to seek someone out to help process their emotions, with parents being the top choice, followed by a close friend. There were some mentions of academic situations that could provoke anxiety, but several students stated that a variety of environments and interactions could instigate a spike in anxiety levels.

KUA students were more dichotomous in their ability to identify their own anxiety. A smaller group seemed to have had ample experience, including medical and therapeutic support, and were able to list off a variety of sensations and situations (particularly social) that would indicate heightened levels of anxiety. Feeling trapped or suffocated were some of the more common responses, and several specifically cited panic attacks as a common manifestation of their anxiety. On the other end of this self-awareness spectrum, many students said they knew they were anxious when they “felt stressed” or “had a big test com[ing] up”. They did not directly cite any physical sensations, and the majority of their proposed anxiety-producing situations were academic in nature.



## **SCHOOL PROGRAMS AND FACILITIES: HOW KUA AND KRISTIN HOLISTICALLY SUPPORT THEIR STUDENTS**

### **Kimball Union Academy**

A major staple of Kimball Union's campus facilities is the recently renovated Health Center. There, students can seek physical aid. Students on prescribed medications can go there for their daily dosage, and the diligent staff work with teachers, advisors, and coaches to ensure students attend their daily responsibilities while managing a variety of physical and emotional challenges. They also touch base with pertinent faculty and a student's parents to ensure their prescribed medication is effective and not detrimental.

The counseling services at KUA have been evolving and growing; until recently, two independent counselors were available for appointments with students, but their services were billed separately, and they were not accessible consistently on campus. While the school still employs these counselors, it has begun to focus on providing further support. Nicole Hapeman has joined the faculty as the Director of Counseling Services, and she has worked with students and faculty to provide a larger network of support through several workshops. Her office is in the Student Center, meaning she is physically separated from the Health Center. She is the point person for most students in crisis, and she is the faculty's greatest asset when it comes to knowing how to support a student with anxiety. Many students have expressed their appreciation for having her on campus, and she has clearly created a welcoming environment for students who struggle with emotional challenges.

Compass, a program usually held during the Wednesday advisory meeting slot, is KUA's approach to teaching self-knowledge and community values. The curriculum is created and disseminated electronically, with advisors working through the assigned agendas with their advisees each week. Some students have found it helpful, though others have mentioned that their advisors do not do some or all of the lessons. Sometimes there is connectivity between the Compass lessons (in the form of All School Meeting topics or lectures), while some lessons are stand-alone workshops. Choices is another program KUA employs to teach students essential values; the first years spend most of their Choices classes learning academic skills, such as taking notes and writing polite but efficient emails. Sophomore Choices tackles social issues such as healthy relationships, and the students are taught to evaluate their role in different social situations.

### **Kristin School**

I spent most of my time on campus in the Kristin School's Wellness Center, and I was impressed with their facility. Nurses, counselors, and other staff who support healthy living on campus (like the sustainability organizer, Sarah Wakeford) are all in this building. Several exam rooms are available for the nurses to see students, and there is even a bright, comforting room in which students can come for

relaxation or decompression. It felt like having a hub for all needs, emotional and physical, created a unified purpose in the school's support team, and it also made it easier for students to not disclose to their peers about their reasons for visiting the center.

The counselors, Chanel Houlahan and Elaine Driver, are passionate, dedicated professionals who spend ample time keeping up to date with current approaches to treating anxiety. Chanel's work with Self-Regulation is extensive, and he holds workshops with current Kristin parents to review cognitive science and its role in raising and supporting children. The counseling team has brought philosophy and psychology researcher Dr. Stuart Shanker to campus for workshops on Self-Regulation, with the hope that his approach can be integrated into the lives of parents and staff.

Academically, Kristin School has implemented structured programming that helps students learn about themselves and others. The Aristotle program tackles EQ and resiliency, though the school is only in its second year with the program.



According to Gillian McCaskey, Deputy Principal and Head of Guidance, they liked the content of the Aristotle program but found the instruction and delivery of the material to be less tailored to the needs, interests, and abilities of teens. Current year 12s have gone through the first year of the Aristotle program, and the staff are optimistic about the results. Tim Oughton, Executive Principal, also shared that building life skills is essential, so the senior school has also incorporated the Learning for Life program, which scaffolds social, emotional, and academic skills. I was able to sit in on a few Learning for Life lessons, and in them, teachers went through cards depicting emotions and asked students to, working individually and in groups, identify each emotion and how to handle that emotion in someone else. In addition to these structured programs, many of the classes I observed incorporated EQ or anxiety management components. A Spanish teacher used handouts and vocabulary geared toward anxiety management for an oral lesson. And English teacher gave students challenging group work and structured his

feedback cycle to allow them to struggle and develop resiliency before inserting himself in their work. It was clear from what I saw in the classrooms that the teachers at Kristin have made it a priority to help their students learn about their own emotions and the emotions of others, and the connectivity between the structured programming and the academic independent lessons was laudable. Even for students who had not yet experienced the Aristotle programming, the systematic commitment to EQ growth seems to have led to a greater increase in student compassion and self-knowledge, as evidenced by the reported levels of anxiety by the year 10s and year 11s. While Kristin students tended to score higher on their average

anxiety level, I postulate that it is because they are more aware of their emotions, and being more honest and aware, are better equipped to handle spikes in anxiety than their KUA counterparts.

## **STUDENT REACTIONS TO ANXIETY**

One aspect of the surveys and focus groups that struck me the most was the response section for the question “When you feel anxious, what do you do?”. Since this was an open-ended question, there was a variety of answers, but a pattern started developing in the survey responses. When I looked at all the answers, it seemed that a response would usually fall into one of the following categories: avoidance or relaxation activities, productive work-based responses, or analysis or metacognition processing. There was, of course, an “other” category (“nothing”, “I don’t know”, “whatever I can”, etc.) but this usually only accounted for 6% (Kristin) to 20% (KUA) of the responses on average. When it came to avoidance or relaxation activities, such as watching Netflix, talking to a friend, or going and doing a physical activity, 66% of KUA sophomores chose this option, compared to 56% of Kristin year 11s. 3% of KUA sophomores chose to be productive, and 6% of Kristin year 11s decided to work to overcome their anxiety. Only 8% of KUA sophomores wanted to break down why they were feeling the way they were feeling, but a staggering 33% of the Kristin year 11s were not just willing but most likely to first sit and try to figure out what was making them upset. Kristin students used words and phrases like “detach” and “make a plan” when describing how to best approach their emotional problem; others said they “reminded [themselves] to breathe” and “take a step back to figure it out”.

In focus groups with year 12s, a similar pattern developed, and many students spoke about using others as a resource, seeking out friends and parents to help them “process” why they were feeling what they were feeling. What most impressed me about this was the students’ understanding of this as a critical skill; they understood that they could not move forward without finding out *why* they were experiencing negative emotions.

## **CHALLENGES AND GOALS FOR THE FUTURE**

### **Kimball Union Academy**

It is clear that KUA cares deeply about its students and values community. As a rigorous school, it could invest more time into a streamlined, pre-structured emotional intelligence program. By investing in a complete program (perhaps once similar to the Kristin School’s Aristotle program) and ensuring a place for it in the academic day schedule, the school could ensure all members of the community are receiving the content and prescribed delivery. The school could also improve its approach to wellness by centralizing all services, particularly emotional and physical/medical, to allow students to greater access to the available services. Consolidating emotional and physical support underscores the concept that mental health is just as much a priority as physical health, and may even help to de-stigmatize negative social perceptions of anxiety and other emotional and mental health concerns.

### **Kristin School**

I was so impressed by the facilities and programming at Kristin School, and as a teacher, I would be eager to get involved in the diverse programming on offer. While I would love to get involved, some students did express in their focus groups that they still do not always feel comfortable taking full advantage of the counseling services. In a group of seven year 12s, only one student could think of someone they knew who had used the services in the Wellness Center. Several students, from year 10s to year 13s, mentioned that the student body is acutely aware of who seeks out emotional and psychological support at the school, and some do not feel “brave” enough to ask for the help they need. This could be a result of the age-old problem of teenagers being hardwired to care what their peers think, but perhaps the school could spend some time and programming normalizing emotional assistance so that students can take advantage of all the amazing programs and people available to them.

## **THANKS AND REFLECTIONS**

I am so grateful for the staff at the Kristin School for their support and kindness. All members of the community were welcoming, and I had some transformative conversations with a variety of staff, administrators, and students. It was humbling to watch the teachers go about their lessons in such a compassionate way, and their passion clearly sparks curiosity in all the students at the school. I am especially grateful to Sarah Wakeford and Kate Denmen for hosting me in their homes; it was so wonderful to stay in their communities and get to see what life is really like for a Kristin staff member.

The students I spoke to were honest and respectful, and I was impressed by their maturity and admiration for their teachers. Kristin truly is a community of lifelong learners and passionate leaders.

Finally, I would like to express my deepest sympathies for the greater New Zealand community in regards to the events of March 15 in Christchurch. This was a trying time for the country, but I was privileged to witness true humanity in the reactions of the Prime Minister, general public, and leaders of the Kristin School. Messages of support for the Muslim community abounded, and the loss of fifty lives seemed to have strengthened the country’s commitment to diversity and equity. The Kristin School held a somber assembly in which students and staff spoke of love, loss, and unity; the ceremony finished with the community singing “Tūtira Mai Ngā Iwi”, and I felt lucky to have witnessed this event.

Thank you to Kimball Union Academy for sending me to New Zealand. I highly encourage other teachers to take advantage of this research opportunity; the chance to visit a community and focus on a topic about which I am passionate has allowed me to become a better teacher and more compassionate trusted adult. Particularly as a teacher at a boarding school, learning about how other school professionals are approaching this topic will help me in my classroom, my dorm, and my advisory.

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