Falling from the Top

The hidden mental health crisis in gifted high schoolers

Do you know if they're okay?

Emily Munro · QAGTC State Conference 2026

SECTION ONE

What the Crisis Looks Like

Life is never as simple as it seems, especially when you're talking about a teenager.

She has already decided who she is not allowed to be.

Identity Foreclosure arises from:

- *Inexperience*
- *Short-sightedness*
- *Social pressure*

(Kroger & Marcia, 2011)

The Forced-Choice Dilemma:

- *Belonging at the cost of authenticity?*
- *Authenticity at the cost of belonging?*

(Jung, McCormick & Gross, 2012)

Activated by:

1. *Prior difficulty with social acceptance of ability*
2. *Dramatic change in social context. eg. Primary-secondary transition or starting at a new school.*

Kroger, J., & Marcia, J. E. (2011). The Identity Statuses: Origins, Meanings, and Interpretations. *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, *1*, 31–53.

Jung, J. Y., McCormick, J., & Gross, M. U. M. (2012). The Forced Choice Dilemma. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, *56(1)*, 15–24.

Eba

Year 7 · Age 11

'A lovely, well-adjusted student who has transitioned well socially. Hard-working and polite. A pleasure to have in class.'

She believes that she is broken.

Fixed Mindset leads to:

- *Underachievement*
- *Task avoidance*

(Mofield & Parker-Peters, 2019; Reis & McCoach, 2000)

Students who are encouraged to set performance goals:

- *Respond more negatively to difficulties*
- *Are unprepared for adversity*

(Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Niehart, 1999)

Activated by:

1. *Performance-orientation (task engagement is primarily to prove ability rather than to develop it)*
2. *Content difficulty that has increased beyond their natural ability*

Mofield, E., & Parker Peters, M. (2019). Understanding Underachievement: Mindset, Perfectionism, and Achievement Attitudes Among Gifted Students. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, *42(2)*, 107–134.
Reis, S. M., & McCoach, D. B. (2000). The Underachievement of Gifted Students: What Do We Know and Where Do We Go? Gifted Child Quarterly, 44(3), 152–170.
Dweck, C.S. & Leggett, E.L. (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality. *Psychological Review*, *95(2)*, 256–273.
Neihart, M. (1999). The impact of giftedness on psychological well-being: What does the empirical literature say? *Roeper Review*, *22(1)*, 10–17.

Jordan

Year 9 · Age 15

‘Missed assessment makes determining progress difficult.’

‘Not working to potential.’

He is thinking about the end.

High-functioning Collapse looks like:

- *Conscientiousness*
- *High personal standards*
- *Performance motivation*

(Winsor et. al., 2020)

High-achieving Environments:

- *Anxiety and depression at 6-7x the national average*

(Luthar et. al., 2020)

Activated by:

1. *Imposter syndrome (the belief that one is not as good as others think they are)*
2. *High-stakes pressure to perform in multiple life spaces*

Winsor, D.L., Aside, O., & McHatton, P.A. (2020). Depression, suicide, and the gifted student: A primer for the school psychologist. *Psychology in the Schools, 57(10),* 1627–1638.

Luthar, S.S., Kumar, N.L., & Zillmer, N. (2020). High-achieving schools connote risks for adolescents: Problems documented, processes implicated, and directions for interventions. *American Psychologist, 75(7)*, 983–995.

Jihong

Year 12 · Age 17

‘A model student. Thriving.’

Predicted ATAR 99.5

SECTION TWO

Noticing the Crack

I looked into the crack. The tiny crack in the wall. And what I saw could not be unsaw.

THREE LAYERS OF PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

Layer I: Whole-school and whole-cohort strategies

Growth Mindset Culture

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Effort, difficulty and recovery are framed as the point of schooling.

- Consistent across all teachers and year levels.
- Feedback in the classroom.
- Language at assemblies.
- Types of awards offered.
- Structure and timing of celebrations.

Learning growth valued over raw results

Burns & Martin (2020) · Dweck & Leggett (1988) · Mofield & Parker Peters (2019)

Universal SEL Programming

Eba, Jordan and Jihong

Dedicated whole-school programming that explores healthy attitudes, beliefs and behaviours for students.

- Consistent throughout the year and sequenced across year levels.
- Intentional space
- Evidence-based program

Internalisation of healthy messages

Durlack et. al. (2011) · Reis & McCoach (2000)

Professional Development

Eba, Jordan and Jihong

Training In giftedness and wellbeing for all teachers and support staff, to promote evidence-based information.

- Identity concealment.
- Masked distress.
- Constellations of unremarkable signs.

Knowing what to look for and where

Woo et al. (2022) · McCoach & Siegle (2007)

THREE LAYERS OF PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

Layer II: Small group, gifted-specific strategies

Academic Acceleration

Eba and Jordan

Delivering the experience of difficulty earlier in the school experience

- Social cohesion
- Consideration of exceptionalities.
- Teacher matching.

Difficulty exposure therapy

Steenbergen-Hu & Moon (2011)

Identification & Counselling

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A system of support that comes to the student rather than relying on self-referral.

- Identified at key transitions.
- Regular touch-points.
- Gifted-aware counsellors

Finding and addressing issues before they become crises

Jung et. al. (2012) · Winsor et. al. (2020)

Strength-based Enrichment

Eba, Jordan and Jihong

Authentic, interest-driven work that promotes progressive success.

- Challenge introduced in a non-graded environment.
- Reinforces interest-based identities.
- Rebuilds gifted identities.

Multiple avenues and paces for success

Baum, Renzulli & Hébert (1995)

Intellectual-peer Mentoring

Eba, Jordan and Jihong

A mentor who has overcome the same struggles to provide exploration of their situation.

- Slightly-older.
- Longer-term relationship.
- Interative

Tangible proof that struggles are survivable.

DuBois et al. (2011)

Layer III: Individual strategies

Achievement Orientation Model

Jordan and Jihong

A diagnostic intervention framework.

- Self-efficacy.
- Goal valuation.
- Environmental perception.
- Interventions are different for the collapse of different combinations of pillars.
- Highly personalized intervention plans.

Targetting interventions that are most likely to be effective

Siegle & McCoach (2005, 2017)

Match-making

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Intentionally choosing and bringing together people who would be good for each other.

- Class allocations.
- Invitations to extracurriculars.
- Intentional seating plans.
- Noticing the constellation of signs.
- Uncovering underlying beliefs.
- Supportive, trusting relationships.

Web of trusted touch-points.

Coleman, Mico & Cross (2015) · Neufeld (2021)

SECTION THREE

Your Turn

Cure is a strange word. It implies an erasure, a turning back of time. But we can't go back, we can only move forward.

Strategy	Eba	Jordan	JiHong
Growth mindset culture	Reframes the cost of visibility	Reframes struggle as process	Reframes help-seeking as strength
Universal SEL	Gives language for the forced choice	Gives language for avoidance	Gives language for internal collapse
Teacher PD	Teacher reads her calibration as a signal, not settling in	Teacher reads non-submission as distress, not laziness	Teacher reads the constellation earlier
Academic acceleration	Less relevant as her crisis is mostly socially underpinned	Delivers challenge history before the cliff	Earlier exposure to manageable pressure
Proactive identification and counselling	Transition check-in surfaces the forced choice	Mid-secondary check-in catches the avoidance pattern	High-achiever check-in finds JiHong before Year 12 and addresses identity not just anxiety.
Strength-based enrichment	Authentic work that doesn't require non-threatening	Rebuilds identity through genuine productivity	Restores a self that isn't grade-contingent
Intellectual-peer mentoring	Hears that belonging and authenticity can coexist	Hears that the cliff is survivable	Hears that the system is not the person and the person matters
AOM framework	Diagnoses goal valuation collapse	Diagnoses self-efficacy pillar damage	Diagnoses environmental perception failure
Match-making	Teachers who get her quirks	Teachers who can be flexible with graded assessment	Teachers who notice the signs accumulating over time