RESOURCE FOR SCHOOLS · 2026

School Toolbox

Practical ways to help academically ambitious girls step forward, drawn from what New Zealand girls told us.

Eight practical areas where schools can close the gap between encouraging girls' ambition and girls feeling safe to show it.



THE PROBLEM

Schools are telling girls to be ambitious, but the culture around them is still teaching them to hide it.

Most girls feel encouraged (72%), yet more than half make themselves seem less ambitious than they are (54%). Encouragement alone isn't closing the gap.

What in the culture	Leads girls to...	At a cost of...
Confidence in girls read as arrogance	Downplay success and seem less ambitious	Potential that teachers and peers never see
Failure treated as a verdict on talent	Stay quiet and avoid intellectual risks	Fewer chances to be stretched and to grow
Academic success celebrated less than sport and the arts	Hide how much they care	Narrower subject choices and aspirations
High-stakes pressure with little visible support	Carry the strain privately	Wellbeing (70% feel the effect)

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

WHY IT MATTERS

How confidence and identity shape achievement

Achievement is not only about ability. It also depends on whether girls feel able to show that ability, and whether being ambitious fits with who they are and how they want to be seen.

Confidence

Whether a girl believes she can succeed shapes whether she speaks up, asks questions, chooses challenging subjects and takes intellectual risks. Each of these is a route to learning and stretch.

Identity

Whether ambition feels compatible with being liked and fitting in. When ambition is read as "bossy" or "trying too hard", girls learn to hide it.

HOW HOLDING BACK ADDS UP

Ambition is read as arrogance, or failure as lack of talent → Girls downplay success, stay quiet and avoid risks → Fewer chances to be stretched, tested and given feedback → Achievement and aspirations fall short of ability

THE IMPACT WE SAW

54% make themselves seem less ambitious than they are

46% avoid speaking in class when they have something to say

48% don't feel confident choosing challenging subjects

70% say grade pressure affects their wellbeing

The survey did not record grades. The link to achievement comes from how girls described their behaviour, choices and pressures, not from measured results.

WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

How to use this toolbox

Each of the eight areas pairs what the survey found with a short list of actions to try. None of them needs new funding, and most can start in a single classroom or department. Feeling encouraged by the school made no difference to whether girls held back, so the actions focus on peers, labels and pressure, not on more encouragement alone.

1. Read the evidence

Share the findings with staff. Girls' own words are often more persuasive than percentages.

2. Pick two or three

Choose the actions that fit your school. The "Where to start" table suggests quick wins.

3. Measure and repeat

Re-ask ten survey questions each year to see whether things are changing for your girls.

> **A note on wellbeing.** If conversations about pressure or setbacks raise concerns about a student, follow your school's pastoral care process and involve the school counsellor.

EIGHT AREAS FOR ACTION

The toolbox

Quotes in the areas below are taken from students' written responses to the survey questions.

1 Treat failure as part of learning, and mean it

WHAT GIRLS TOLD US

63% fear they lack talent when they fail. Where girls agree their school treats failure as normal, that fear drops from **74% to 51%**.

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

WHAT TO TRY

- ☐ Give feedback on strategy and effort ("what to try next"), not on ability ("you're a natural").
- ☐ Build low-stakes drafts, retakes and reflection into assessment so setbacks have a visible next step.
- ☐ Have staff and senior students share real setbacks and how they recovered.

2 Name the confidence–arrogance double standard

WHAT GIRLS TOLD US

69% say confidence in girls is mistaken for arrogance. Girls who agree are four times as likely to downplay their ambition (**64% vs 15%**).

> *"You are very good at maths for a girl."*

A comment girls report hearing from teachers.

WHAT TO TRY

- ☐ Run short staff sessions on gendered language, using girls' own words from this survey.
- ☐ Agree as a staff that labels like "bossy" or "teacher's pet" are challenged when heard, as with other put-downs.
- ☐ Praise girls' assertiveness and leadership explicitly when it happens.

3 Make it safe to speak in class

WHAT GIRLS TOLD US

Only **50%** feel confident sharing ideas in class, and **46%** avoid speaking even when they have something to say.

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

WHAT TO TRY

- ☐ Use think–pair–share, mini-whiteboards and written or anonymous responses before whole-class discussion.
- ☐ Replace cold-calling hesitant students with "warm calling": tell a student in advance you'll ask her view.
- ☐ In male-heavy classes, track who speaks and who gets follow-up questions.

4 Celebrate academic success as visibly as sport and arts

WHAT GIRLS TOLD US

57% say sporting or arts success is celebrated more than academic success, and **48%** downplay their success around friends.

> *"Maintaining anonymity when discussing grades publicly is important."*

WHAT TO TRY

- [ ] Give academic achievement and academic risk-taking equal airtime in assemblies, newsletters and social media.
- [ ] Recognise effort and growth, not just top marks, so success isn't only for a few.
- [ ] Keep marks private by default and avoid public rankings. Review award names for gendered framing.

5 Reduce pressure and support wellbeing

WHAT GIRLS TOLD US

70% say grade pressure affects their wellbeing, 38% strongly. It was the same in co-ed and single-sex schools. Girls who worry what others think when they fail are far more likely to say so (**85% vs 30%**).

> *"Even though we get a good grade doesn't mean... we are not struggling."*

WHAT TO TRY

- [ ] Coordinate an assessment calendar across subjects so deadlines don't pile up.
- [ ] Stop repeating "this is the hardest course" as motivation; girls say it adds fear, not drive.
- [ ] Check in regularly with high achievers too, since good grades can hide real struggle.
- [ ] Talk about academic struggle openly in form time and health classes.

6 Lead with peer support, not confidence workshops

WHAT GIRLS TOLD US

The most wanted supports were hearing from older students (**58%**), open conversations about girls' academic experiences (**57%**) and senior-student mentors (**48%**). A confidence workshop came last (**24%**).

WHAT TO TRY

- [ ] Run termly panels where older students talk about subject choice, IB and setbacks, with a range of experiences, not only stars or horror stories.
- [ ] Pair girls starting IB or senior study with a trained senior mentor.
- [ ] Hold facilitated small-group conversations about girls' academic experiences, led by a trusted adult outside their own classes.

7 Keep hard subjects open to girls

WHAT GIRLS TOLD US

48% don't feel confident choosing academically challenging subjects. Girls describe being steered away from maths and physics.

> *"Every single teacher and student I talked to discouraged me."*

WHAT TO TRY

- [ ] Base subject advice on evidence of potential, not just past placement, and encourage girls to stretch.
- [ ] Show female role models from STEM, law, economics and fields beyond medicine.
- [ ] Offer girls-in-STEM clubs and competitions.

8 For co-ed schools: borrow what works in single-sex settings

WHAT GIRLS TOLD US

Girls at single-sex schools were far more likely to say girls are encouraged (**100%** vs 52%), that their school supports risk-taking (**86% vs 48%**) and that they can be ambitious and accepted (**86% vs 48%**).

Based on the 53 respondents asked their school type (31 co-ed, 22 single-sex).

WHAT TO TRY

- [ ] State girls' academic ambition explicitly in school messaging and leadership roles.
- [ ] Create girl-led spaces such as study groups, clubs and mentoring within the school.
- [ ] Survey girls each year on school climate and act on the gaps.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Where to start

Begin with the low-cost changes this term, then build towards the bigger shifts.

When	Actions
This term	• Keep marks private by default • Use think–pair–share and warm calling • Stop the "hardest course" message • Challenge put-down labels when heard
This year	• Older-student panels and senior mentors • A staff session on gendered language • A cross-subject assessment calendar
Longer term	• Redesign assessment to allow drafts and retakes • Review how the school recognises success • Review subject-choice advice • Run an annual climate survey

TRACKING CHANGE

Measuring progress

Re-ask these ten survey questions of your girls each year. The 2026 figures are the baseline from this research.

Area	Survey statement	2026 baseline (% agree)	Aim
1. Failure	At my school, failure is treated as a normal part of learning	**51%**	↑ Up
1. Failure	When I am failing, I am afraid I might not have enough talent	**63%**	↓ Down
2. Double standard	Confidence in girls is sometimes mistaken for arrogance	**69%**	↓ Down
2. Double standard	I sometimes make myself seem less ambitious or confident than I really am	**54%**	↓ Down
3. Classroom voice	I feel confident sharing my ideas in class	**50%**	↑ Up
3. Classroom voice	I sometimes avoid speaking in class even when I have something to say	**46%**	↓ Down
4. Recognition	Students are more comfortable celebrating sporting or arts success than academic success	**57%**	↓ Down
4. Recognition	I sometimes downplay my academic success around my friends	**48%**	↓ Down
5. Wellbeing	The pressure to achieve high grades affects my wellbeing	**70%**	↓ Down
8. Climate	I feel I can be both academically ambitious and accepted at my school	**62%**	↑ Up

Answers use a 1–5 scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree); the failure item uses a 0–100 scale, counting 75 or 100 as agreeing. With around 100 respondents, treat changes smaller than about 10 percentage points with caution.

ABOUT NO SMALL AMBITION

The research behind this toolbox

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. This toolbox draws on an anonymous survey of 104 girls aged 15–18 at New Zealand schools between July and October 2026. All results are reported in aggregate, and quotes are anonymised.

Interviews with students are the next phase. This toolbox will be updated as that work adds girls' own explanations and ideas.

GET INVOLVED

Schools can take part in the next phase, compare results or share what has worked.

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