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Using data to support student wellbeing during the pandemic

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Over the past few years at Brisbane Grammar School, there has been a strategic and growing focus on using data to provide individualised care to all students. The Student Wellbeing Team (SWT), consisting of Heads of Year, Assistant Heads of Year, wellbeing directors, and counsellors, has increasingly sought out and used data to track and support the wellbeing of their students. With this focus on being evidence-informed, and when the school moved to home-based learning as a result of COVID-19, the SWT expressed an interest in regularly surveying students to keep track of their progress. To ensure the process was effective, and provided useful information in a timely manner, a data collection process, analysis, and feedback loop had to be quickly engineered. The process has reinforced the power of data and evidence-informed practice, the importance of data in offering truly individualised pastoral care, and has fast-tracked the development of processes that will continue at BGS in the post-pandemic world.

Survey questions

Student surveys began in the second last week of Term 1 (when the school trialed home-based learning), and continued weekly until the end of Week 5, Term 2. Prior to the first survey, a number of core questions were identified by the SWT to be used weekly, so as to enable longitudinal analysis as well as individual care. The questions were:

- Overall, how are you feeling? (rated 1-5);
- Explain how you are feeling in a couple of words;
- Rate how well you are sleeping (1-5);
- Rate your level of physical activity and exercise (1-5); and
- Rate how productive you have been in your learning (1-5).

Each week, questions were added to the core questions to learn more about specific elements of the student experience. The surveys were deliberately kept as short as possible, but additional questions included:

- What was the most valuable learning experience from the week and why was it valuable?
- How have you changed as a learner?
- What is something that you would like to see continue post-pandemic?
- How are you feeling about returning to school?

Themes from the student data

The surveys elicited useful and interesting feedback about both student wellbeing and the home-based learning experience. Some of the themes that emerged regarding learning preferences were:

- Students had very clear views about what works for them and their learning and they were very happy to share their perspectives;
- The valued synchronous online lessons where the teacher planned a variety of activities, including some direct teaching, small group work, screen sharing and individual work;
- Students spoke highly of the opportunity to collaborate with their peers and use small group 'meetings' in Microsoft Teams channels to work with their peers;
- They had strong views about lesson length, the value of clearly articulated expectations, and lesson structure; and
- They valued activities that allowed them to work 'off-screen'.

Actioning findings

From the outset, we were aware that the surveying process would only be effective if we could quickly return feedback to key stakeholders so that they could action important information in the data. Every Monday morning, the SWT were provided with a data summary of student survey responses, specific to their particular portfolio. One feature of this summary was that Heads of Year and Assistant Heads of Year could compare their year level responses in the core quantitative questions longitudinally and against school averages (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Longitudinal comparison of quantitative survey responses for a year level, compared with school averages (red dotted line)

In addition, the Coordinator of Learning Analytics built a visualisation dashboard that prioritised students who required contact from a member of the SWT (see Figure 2).

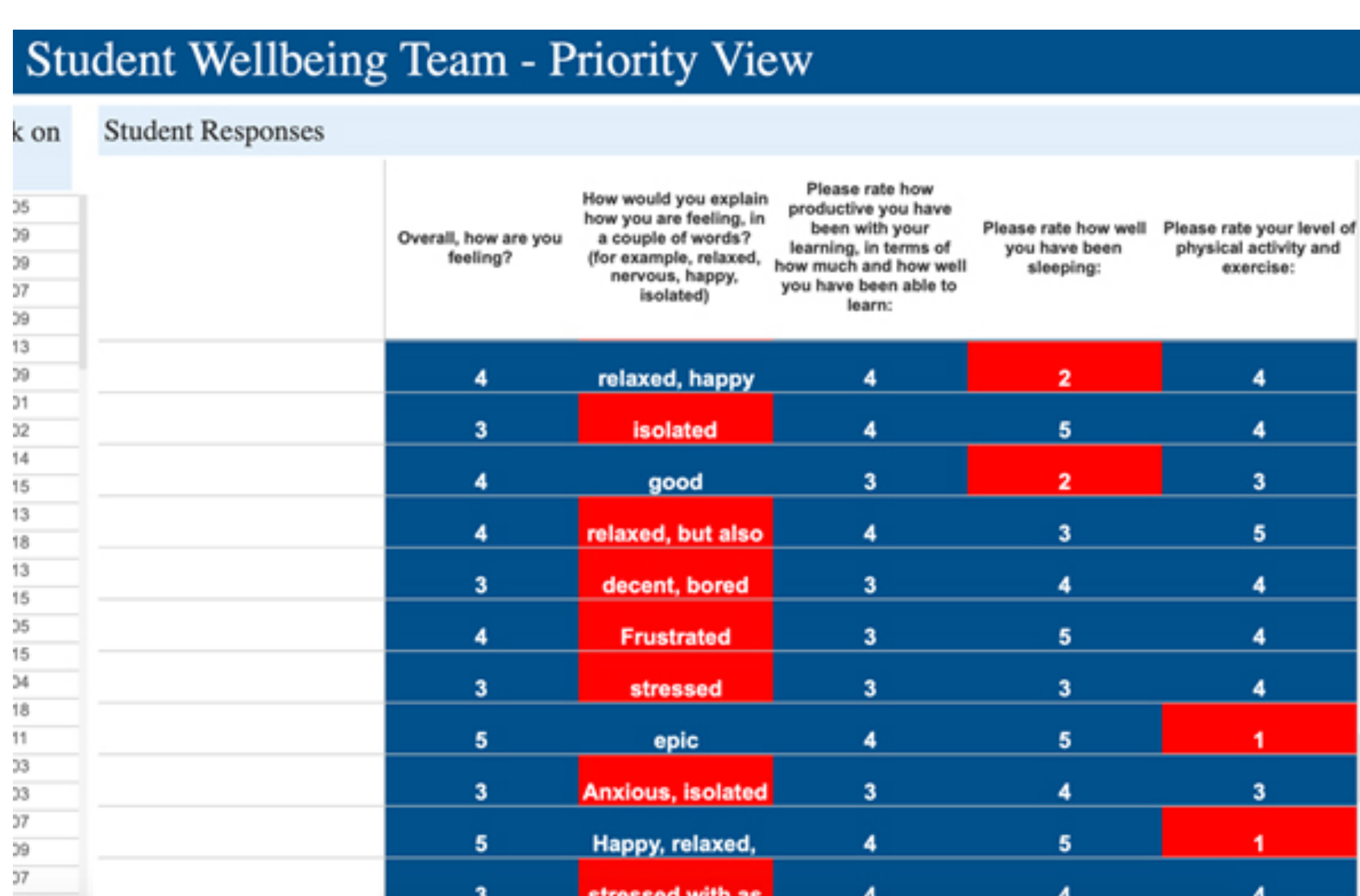


Figure 2: SWT dashboard visualisation

Student survey responses that were a '1' or a '2' out of 5 were highlighted red in the visualisation, as well as qualitative student responses that contained negative adjectives about how they were feeling. All other responses were coloured blue. To prioritise students, the red boxes were counted to produce an overall order of priority – students with all red boxes went to the top of the list, followed by students that had one blue response, followed by two blue responses etc. This visualisation directed the SWT to students that most needed support, and a member of the team phoned these families directly. While these conversations were prompted by the survey results, it enabled the SWT to touch base with students that most needed them to share and suggest strategies to improve their wellbeing.

In addition, we knew that this information had to make it back to the students, largely so they could see we were listening, and so they could see overall how the rest of the community was travelling. Each week we published an infographic to students (see Figure 3) containing a summary of the student responses. We were mindful of the fact that although most boys responded well and were quite positive, we needed to ensure any regular concerns were reflected in the infographic.

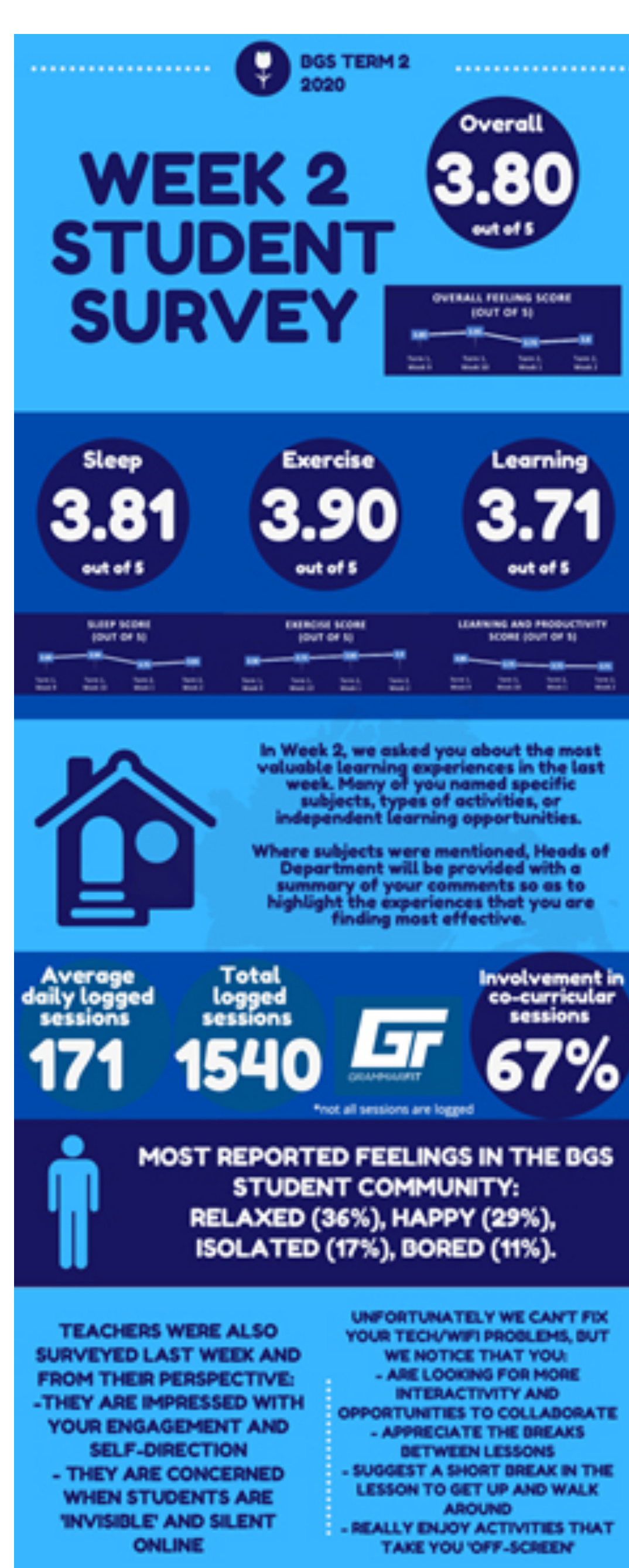


Figure 3: An infographic shared with members of the Brisbane Grammar School community

The impact of the data on providing individualised care

While trends in the learning experience data were shared with Heads of Department, and infographics were returned to students, there has been considerable momentum built in the way in which the SWT are evidence-informed and the way they use data to provide truly individualised care. Sam Lobascher, Head of Year 9 reported that:

The main way in which we used the data was to identify individual students who were having difficulties, and to offer them access to further support. Some student responses allowed us to see that they were vulnerable, so we invited them to work on campus which helped them to get back on track. For other students we directed them to counselling, or simply communicated with their teachers that they were struggling. The information also ensured that one-on-one check-ins were far more productive as we were equipped with a range of information to review prior to the call; it ensured that there was a clear focus to our discussions.

The student survey data provided summary and priority information to the SWT within two days of boys completing the survey. The SWT found that the data allowed them to learn more about their students and provide more bespoke and individually tailored care, which was especially important when students weren't physically on campus.

Post-pandemic, student surveys will be less frequent, but they will feature as a key method of checking in on student wellbeing. Although we will all be glad to see the end of many of the restrictions and limitations of pandemic life, evidence-informed wellbeing tracking will be part of the 'new normal' at Brisbane Grammar, and we are grateful for the way in which the pandemic fast-tracked the development of these processes which will ultimately benefit every boy.

About the Author

Dr Selena Fisk has 16 years teaching experience in both state and private schools in Queensland, Australia, and in comprehensive schools in South London, England. She earned her Doctor of Education degree from the Queensland University of Technology in 2017 and has held a range of leadership roles in her career, including learning area-specific leadership and whole-school curriculum and pedagogy. In 2017, Selena started her data consultancy practice, Aasha for Schools, to help teachers and school leaders see the inherent good that data can bring, as well as the benefits of using data to develop thriving learning communities. Selena has published two books with Hawker Brownlow Education: *Using and Analysing Data in Australian Schools: Why, How and What (2019)* and *Leading Data-Informed Change in Schools (2020)*. In 2019, Selena was named as an ACEL New Voice scholarship recipient, and Aasha for Schools was recognised as one of the 'Top 50 organisations in education' at the GFEL conference in Dubai.

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