


Article

Empowering Educators and Students to Flourish: Evaluating the Student Alliance for Flourishing Program in Middle and High Schools

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Abstract: There is a critical need to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the well-being of students and educators. In this article, we present findings from the second year of implementing the Student Alliance for Flourishing program, a school-wide initiative to promote the flourishing of students and educators. First, we highlight the connection between Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory and the Student Alliance for Flourishing (SAFF) program, emphasizing the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in supporting the psychological needs of educators and students. Then, we describe the SAFF program and present data that highlight the program's impact on advisors and students, particularly as these data relate to participants' flourishing. Finally, we conclude by emphasizing the significance of promoting flourishing in schools and the need for further empirical research in this area.

Keywords: flourishing; intervention; qualitative data; quantitative data; self-determination theory; well-being



Citation: Larson, K.E.; Dunn, M.S.; Tek, B.-A.; Justice, A.L. Empowering Educators and Students to Flourish: Evaluating the Student Alliance for Flourishing Program in Middle and High Schools. *Educ. Sci.* **2024**, *14*, 340. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14040340>

Academic Editors: Dawna-Cricket Martita Meehan, Sharon L. Custer, Kristy Brann, Kyle Bush and Myint Swe Khine

Received: 15 December 2023

Revised: 1 March 2024

Accepted: 11 March 2024

Published: 23 March 2024



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the mental health and well-being of educators and students. According to one study [1], almost half (45%) of school staff indicated moderate to severe depression during the pandemic, and the vast majority (82%) of school staff indicated moderate to severe anxiety during this time. A 2021 study by Lynch [2] examined the traumatic exposure responses of K-12 teachers in North Carolina and found that the most common emotions experienced by teachers during the time of the pandemic were exhaustion, anger, fear, hypervigilance, and guilt. Lynch [2] also found that the majority of teachers believed that the COVID-19 pandemic and their school's response to the pandemic negatively impacted their mental health.

Not only did teachers experience challenges related to the pandemic but several studies validated what the world already knew: the pandemic increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression in PK–12 youth as well, and these impacts differed by demographic characteristics [1,3]. According to one systematic review, Naff and colleagues [3] found that between 14% and 33% of their systematic review's samples presented symptoms of clinical depression, 20% of samples reported increased anxiety levels, and 70.2% of adolescents reported self-isolation, disconnection, and feelings of loneliness [3]. Correa and First [1] found that students also exhibited difficulties related to COVID-19 including being worried (86.4%); being unhappy, depressed, or tearful (77.1%); feeling fearful (71.3%); losing their temper (62.6%); experiencing hyperactivity/inattention, including being restless and overactive (88.8%); being easily distracted (91.4%); and experiencing peer problems (66.1%). The study also reported a positive association between students' distress and school staff's anxiety and depression [1]. Given these statistics for both educators and youth, it is clear

that a systematic, equitable, collaborative, and sustainable approach is necessary to combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recognizing the profound impact of the pandemic, the U.S. Department of Education urged leaders in districts and schools to prioritize wellness for every child, student, educator, and provider [4]. To this end, the Department of Education awarded USD 13.2 billion in ESSER I funding, USD 54.3 billion in ESSER II funding, and USD 122 billion for ARP ESSER funding between 2020 and 2024 to state and local education agencies to address the impact of COVID-19 [5]. Despite this call to action and additional funding, however, many district leaders and educators struggled to support themselves or their students' well-being [6,7].

In 2021, Santoro and Price [6] wrote a brief aimed at helping educational leaders provide structural support for educators following the pandemic. Their report identifies demoralization and burnout as two factors impacting teachers' ability to do their jobs and remain in the profession. They pointed out that wellness should not be a "superficial, siloed, or short-term goal" (p. 1) and that "teacher morale is higher in environments where teachers have the autonomy to exercise their professional judgment, be creative, and make decisions about how best to teach their students" (p. 5). As such, any intervention that seeks to improve teacher morale and decrease teacher burnout must motivate and empower educators. Specifically, these interventions must be meaningful, collaborative, and long-term while also allowing teachers to be creative and autonomous.

In this article, we describe the Student Alliance for Flourishing (SAFF), a research–practice partnership project that was carried out in collaboration with a mid-Atlantic school district to empower educators and students to flourish. Our conceptualization of flourishing is aligned with VanderWeele's five domains: (1) mental and physical health, (2) happiness and life satisfaction, (3) meaning and purpose, (4) character and virtue, and (5) close social relationships [8]. We also use the Human Flourishing Index [8] and interviews with educators and students to capture and understand the impact of SAFF on participants' levels of flourishing and satisfaction with this program. We present our project and findings to support educators, school leaders, and researchers in the shared goal of enhancing the well-being of K-12 students and staff, both post-pandemic and beyond. We contribute to the literature by first sharing what has been done in schools to promote flourishing and then by describing an alternative approach to increasing students' and educators' levels of flourishing, grounding that approach in a theoretical framework and using data to support our hypotheses about using such an approach.

1.1. Flourishing Interventions in Schools

Although conceptual and theoretical models on how to promote flourishing in schools exist [9–14], few studies report actual data on the impact of interventions intended to promote flourishing in schools (c.f. [15–18]). For instance, Cherkowski and Walker [15] conducted a qualitative study with 43 teachers and administrators in rural Canadian elementary and secondary schools to better understand teachers' perspectives on flourishing in schools. In their focus group conversations, they noted that teachers saw well-being as a relational and active pursuit. They also noted that teachers described flourishing as a co-created experience for and with students and colleagues. In a subsequent paper, Cherkowski and colleagues [16] interviewed nine school administrators in two Canadian K-12 school districts to better understand how to foster, support, and encourage flourishing in schools. They found that school leaders' flourishing was largely tied to their sense of purpose and their work with others to improve learning. Moreover, these administrators highlighted the importance of work–life balance to address potential stress. In both studies led by Cherkowski, the notion of adopting a positive, strengths-based approach was imperative to teachers' and administrators' levels of flourishing.

Laakso and colleagues [18] examined the impact of the Flourishing Students Program on students' emotions using a cluster randomized research design with 136 students in Swedish-speaking Finnish public schools (grades 5 and 6; aged 10–12). The Flourishing Students Program was an example of a Positive Psychology Intervention (PPI) and was

based on the PERMA model of well-being, which includes five elements (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment). In this 10-week/10-lesson program, students participated in mindfulness exercises, gratitude journaling, and goal setting. The findings suggested that this program had a buffering effect on the increase in daily negative emotions and that students reported feeling less lonely, more calm, and more enjoyment in being alone. By the end of the study, students in the intervention group were less worried, lonely, nervous, and sad post-intervention than students in the control group who received no intervention.

Lastly, Hampson and colleagues [17] examined 866 high school students' levels of flourishing at Sevenoaks School in the United Kingdom using qualitative and quantitative data. This research group used the definition and measurement (i.e., Human Flourishing Index) of flourishing from the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University [8] and found that the average level of flourishing at the school was 70 out of 100. Moreover, the group found that flourishing decreased as students matriculated through school and that female students reported lower levels of flourishing compared to their male counterparts. Regarding types of activities, students reported that teachers used exercise, humor, and volunteering the most to foster flourishing and used mindfulness, social support, and gratitude activities the least. This project is especially notable because the researchers involved the students in the research process; students were not only active participants but also acted as research fellows for this study.

1.2. The Current Study

Current empirical research on promoting flourishing in schools for both educators and students is limited. Therefore, it is important to further conceptualize theories that promote flourishing as well as create and evaluate systematic approaches to support flourishing in schools. As such, we sought to examine the following research questions: (1) What are the participants' views on the Student Alliance for Flourishing program activities? (2) What are participants' levels of satisfaction with the program? (3) To what extent do participants believe their flourishing has changed as a result of program participation? We hypothesized that participants would have positive views about the program activities and overall satisfaction with the program and that they would self-report higher levels of flourishing as a result of participation.

In the following sections, we first present the Social Determination Theory (SDT) [19,20] as an essential theoretical framework for effectively working with educators to promote flourishing. We then describe the SAFF program and discuss how SDT serves as the foundation for the program. Next, we describe participant demographics, SAFF implementation, and the methodologies used for data gathering and analysis. Finally, we conclude with an analysis of our study's findings, including its limitations and considerations for future research.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

In their 2013 chapter entitled, "What Humans Need: Flourishing in Aristotelian Philosophy and Self-Determination Theory," Ryan, Curren, and Deci argue that the universal needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are central to human flourishing [21]. Specifically, they write, "In search of human flourishing, current empirical evidence has strongly sustained the SDT perspective that supports for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, both within specific social settings and in broader cultural contexts, foster human wellness, fuller functioning, and subjective happiness" (p. 69).

SDT highlights three basic psychological needs that are essential for intrinsic motivation and well-being: autonomy, competence, and relatedness [19,20]. In short, autonomy is the feeling of having input, being authentic, and acting with choice; competence is defined as feeling successful in meeting external demands; and relatedness is feeling connected and cared for by a community. According to Ryan and colleagues [21], Self-Determination Theory is consistent with flourishing when one acts with autonomy and integrity, pursues

intrinsic goals, and is mindful. Therefore, we use Self-Determination Theory [19,20] to guide our work and support the psychological needs of our school partners.

2. Method

In the section below, we offer a brief description of the Student Alliance for Flourishing and how this program supports autonomy, competence, and relatedness. We then describe the participants, data collection procedures and measures, and analytical methods used in our study.

2.1. The Student Alliance for Flourishing

The Student Alliance for Flourishing supports students' comprehensive well-being using a proactive, small-group process. There are five main components of SAFF: (1) Personnel, (2) Recruitment, (3) Implementation, (4) Content, and (5) Meetings. In short, there are four key personnel (i.e., university program coordinators, school system representatives, school-based administrators, and school-based advisors). The university program coordinators work with school system representatives, school-based administrators, and school-based advisors to support and promote flourishing in schools. Regarding recruitment, university program coordinators work with school system representatives to recruit principals. Principals select at least one teacher or staff member to lead SAFF groups in the school building. Once school-based advisors commit to being a part of the program, they recruit students to join the SAFF group. Students in SAFF can also recruit other students to join their SAFF group.

There are two parts to the program's implementation. First, university program coordinators train school-based advisors on flourishing and how to run a SAFF group. These trainings occur monthly via Zoom over the school year (September–May) and are supplemented with optional technical assistance meetings (also via Zoom) once a month. In terms of implementation in schools, SAFF advisors hold weekly meetings with groups of students who have been recruited (either by an adult or peer) or who self-select to join SAFF. Meetings with students at the school generally include six components: (1) Check-In and Goal Setting, (2) Flourishing Content and Practice, (3) SAFF Updates, (4) Community Flourishing Project Planning, (5) Announcements/Open Floor, and (6) Reflection/Application. During this time, SAFF advisors check in with students about how they are doing regarding their flourishing, model and discuss practices to support flourishing (e.g., breathing, gratitude, journaling), and engage students in community service activities at school, local, national, and global levels. Advisors have autonomy in what activities they engage their students in, so long as the activities are aligned with the Education for Flourishing Standards [22,23].

The SAFF program was first piloted in the 2021–2022 school year to address the specific needs of both typically developing students and students identified by teachers and administrators as needing extra social–emotional and behavioral support [24]. In the first year, university program coordinators trained eight educators from five high schools about flourishing and how to lead a SAFF group. Based on advisor feedback from the first year of implementation whereby advisors suggested starting the program with middle schoolers, we recruited three middle schools for our current study.

While much of the program's core features from Year 1 continued to be implemented (i.e., holding monthly meetings with advisors to provide content about flourishing, checking in with them, offering technical assistance meetings once a month, encouraging SAFF advisors to use an agenda for meetings that include a check-in, flourishing practice, and community project), there were key changes between Year 1 and Year 2. We describe these key changes in the section below (see also Table 1).

Table 1. Core features of the Student Alliance for Flourishing and programmatic changes between Years 1 and 2.

Core Features	Brief Description (Year 1)	Brief Description (Year 2)
Personnel	University program coordinators School system representatives School-based administrators School-based advisors	No changes made
Recruitment	University program coordinators work with school system representatives to recruit principals Principals select at least one educator or mental health professional to lead SAFF groups in the school building School-based advisors recruit students to join the SAFF group Students recruit other students to join the SAFF group	Strongly encouraged principals to recommend two staff (at least one of whom had a mental health background and a “willingness and orientation” towards trauma-informed practices, social-emotional learning, relationship building, and wellness)
Implementation	University program coordinators visit each school and train school-based advisors separately about flourishing and how to run a SAFF group; subsequent training occurs monthly over the course of the school year (September–May) and technical assistance meetings are held once a month SAFF advisors hold weekly meetings with groups of students who have been recruited to join SAFF	University program coordinators held an in-person, outdoor group retreat with advisors at the beginning of September Provided advisors with a handbook that outlined their roles and responsibilities The handbook included an implementation fidelity checklist Conducted mid-year site visits using the implementation fidelity checklists [24] Held two in-person working socials to create group cohesion and receive “Semester Updates” from SAFF advisors Encouraged advisors to support their colleagues (in addition to their SAFF groups) Used the book “The Art of Flourishing” by Jeffrey Rubin [26] to ground advisors’ learning about flourishing throughout the year Documented advisors’ ideas in a “Collaborative SAFF Advisor Google Doc” Sent weekly newsletters with announcements, pages to read, and practices to try
Content	Used university program coordinator PowerPoints and videos aligned with the domains and activities for human flourishing [8,25] and Education for Flourishing Standards [22,23].	
Meeting Structure	Check-In and Goal Setting Flourishing Content and Practice SAFF Updates Community Flourishing Project Planning Announcements/Open Floor Reflection/Application	No changes made

2.2. Programmatic Changes between Year 1 and Year 2 Implementation

During our second year of SAFF program implementation, we made changes to the number of advisors and specified the qualities we were looking for in our advisors (see Table 1). For instance, we strongly encouraged principals to select two advisors (at least one of whom had a mental health background). Three of the five groups (60%) from the first year of SAFF implementation had only one advisor; however, when we visited the groups and spoke to the advisors who had co-advisors, we realized that the students were better served with two advisors. Having two people serve as co-advisors reduced the amount of work that went into planning and implementation and also made the project more collaborative. Moreover, we encouraged principals to ask staff who they thought might be interested and who were oriented towards topics like trauma-informed practices, social-emotional learning, relationship building, and wellness (rather than telling staff members that they were required to advise this group regardless of interest).

Second, we changed our processes regarding content. Specifically, the university program coordinators held an in-person group retreat with advisors at the beginning of September, rather than visiting each school and individually training them. We held this retreat outdoors (rather than in a school building) and provided advisors with a handbook that outlined their roles and responsibilities. Also included in this handbook was an implementation fidelity checklist so that advisors would know what it looked like to run a SAFF meeting. We conducted mid-year site visits using the implementation fidelity checklists [24] in December of 2022. Moreover, we used the book “The Art of Flourishing” by Jeffrey Rubin [26] to ground advisors’ learning about flourishing throughout the year, rather than using a series of PowerPoint presentations and videos created by the university program coordinators. Throughout the year, we documented advisors’ ideas in a Collaborative SAFF Advisor Google Doc at monthly meetings so that advisors could reflect on what they were most proud of doing with their students since the last SAFF advisor meeting. Having this document helped advisors to cross-pollinate ideas for supporting both student and adult flourishing in their building. We also sent weekly newsletters to the group. These newsletters contained valuable information such as announcements, pages to read, and practices. With regards to the practices, we specified three separate audiences for these practices: (1) themselves, (2) adults in their buildings, and (3) students in their SAFF groups.

In addition, we held two in-person socials. The purpose of holding these socials (one in December and one in May) was to create cohesion in the group, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. During these in-person socials, we asked SAFF advisors to complete written “Semester Update” forms. These forms asked advisors to list their accomplishments, challenges, budget requests, and one thing that SAFF university program coordinators could do to make SAFF advising easier for the next semester.

Lastly, we highlighted the idea that SAFF advisors are integral to supporting not only their students but also their colleagues. As such, many of the advisors were members of their school’s wellness committees and helped to design activities to support adult flourishing. These co-created activities for adults included community wellness fairs, “sunshine hours” at local eateries, or yoga/breathing/meditation sessions before or after school. By receiving training from university program coordinators and providing support to students and staff, we wanted SAFF advisors to promote flourishing throughout the building (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. SAFF coordination and integration efforts.

Now that we have explained the SAFF program and described the changes made each year, we turn our attention to the ways in which SAFF is grounded by concepts of Self-Determination Theory (SDT).

2.3. *The Relationship between SDT and The Student Alliance for Flourishing*

Social Determination Theory [19,20] serves as the foundation for the Student Alliance for Flourishing program in supporting educators' autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Below, we describe each tenet of SDT and its connection to program components.

2.3.1. Autonomy

University program coordinators offer SAFF advisors a clear and meaningful goal—to increase their students' and their own flourishing—and allow them the autonomy to choose how they want to approach this goal. SAFF advisors access the flourishing framework [8], through which they decide the direction and path their particular club will take. Specifically, university program coordinators provide advisors with ideas on how to implement SAFF to increase community flourishing but also encourage them to dip into their own “funds of knowledge” [27] to make the activities their own. University program coordinators also encourage advisors to share their opinions and feedback using formative feedback (i.e., “Semester Updates”), allow them to collectively brainstorm at monthly meetings and add ideas to shared documents, and, finally, invite them to participate in an end-of-year evaluation. Throughout the process, SAFF advisors exercise their autonomy and share this expertise. University program coordinators hold SAFF advisors in high regard for their competence, trusting them to make decisions in the best interests of their students.

2.3.2. Competence

We aim to ensure that SAFF advisors experience success in meeting external requirements. First, we ask principals to hand-pick advisors who have skills and interests in well-being, thriving, and building relationships with students. We encourage the principal to tell advisors why they selected the educator to take on this role (i.e., because of their competence). Second, university program coordinators offer SAFF advisors opportunities to learn new skills related to flourishing and provide them with resources, support, and guidance to help them implement SAFF successfully. We maintain that this aspect of the SAFF program fosters advisors' competence by providing the tools necessary for them to feel successful in meeting external demands because there are clear expectations for the demands and support for meeting them. Thirdly, university program coordinators use an implementation fidelity tool to provide formative feedback to SAFF advisors, emphasizing their strengths and identifying areas for improvement. The implementation checklist not only provides advisors with clear expectations in advance but also ensures that program coordinators actively recognize advisors' strengths, fostering their sense of accomplishment in adhering to the fidelity checklist components. Lastly, university program coordinators acknowledge and celebrate their achievements in both Zoom and in-person meetings. During these gatherings, each advisor is invited to discuss the positive aspects of their SAFF group's progress and identify any additional support they require to enhance their sense of competence.

2.3.3. Relatedness

University program coordinators strive to cultivate a positive and nurturing atmosphere during our retreats and monthly meetings. These efforts ensure that SAFF advisors are not only recognized as valuable individuals but also as integral team members, fostering an environment of respect and appreciation. The monthly meetings foster a sense of belonging and connection among the SAFF advisors by facilitating collaboration and social interaction. University program coordinators show genuine interest and care for SAFF advisors by checking in with them and providing individualized support. Finally, SAFF advisors support each other, share their experiences and insights, and experience fun and fellowship together.

2.4. Participants

The SAFF program was initially implemented in eight schools in one mid-Atlantic school district during the 2022–2023 academic year; however, one school withdrew its participation midway through the year due to staffing changes and ensuing scheduling conflicts (see Table 2). Of the seven schools that participated for the entire year, three were high schools continuing the program from the previous year, one was a new high school, and three were new middle school additions. At the start of the year, SAFF included 17 advisors, but that number decreased to 13 due to staff changes (e.g., promotions, FMLA leave, scheduling conflicts). Across the seven participating schools, advisors’ reports during the interview revealed that approximately 70 students attended at least one meeting; the majority of these students were middle school students.

Table 2. Student and advisor participation in SAFF group.

	School	Level	# of Advisors	Approx # of Students in SAFF Group
Continuing Schools from 2021–2022	#1 *	High	2 → 1	0
	#2	High	1	~3
	#3	High	3 → 2	~7
	#4	High	2	~4
	#5	* High	2	~5
* New Schools in 2022–2023	#6	* Middle	2	~20
	#7	* Middle	3 → 2	~9
	#8	* Middle	2	~22
TOTAL	8 Schools		17 → 13	~70

* Note: School #1 dropped SAFF mid-year due to changes in personnel.

Student participation in SAFF fluctuated throughout the year and data collection was optional, which resulted in a small sample size. Moreover, participation in SAFF was not restricted to those who would participate in data collection activities. Mid-way through the year (February), advisors provided contact information for parents or guardians of students who had attended more than one SAFF meeting. Active parental consent was obtained for students who participated in data collection activities.

2.5. Measures

In this study, data were collected via a survey and focus group interviews (see Table 3). Those measures are described in detail below.

Table 3. Student and advisor participation in data collection.

Data Collection Method	Group	# of Participants	Response Rate
Survey	Advisors	10	67%
	Students	10	~14%
Interview	Advisors	8	53%
	Students	21	~30%

2.5.1. Survey to Assess Activities, Satisfaction, and Changes in Levels of Flourishing

Participants were asked to respond to a survey that was aligned with the three main research questions regarding activities, satisfaction, and overall changes in levels of flourishing. Advisors and consenting students provided feedback on the execution of SAFF activities (i.e., breathing exercises, gratitude circles, and journaling) and their levels of participation in each of these activities. Moreover, all participants responded to survey items designed to gather their levels of satisfaction with the SAFF program (i.e., “Overall, I am satisfied with the Student Alliance for Flourishing”).

To assess changes in levels of flourishing, participants responded to retrospective versions of Harvard’s Flourishing Index. Advisors took the Human Flourishing Index

(HFI) and students took the Flourishing Index—Adolescent Version (see Appendix A). In its original form, the HFI includes 10 items, with two items related to each domain. As an example, for the “meaning and purpose” domain, one of the two questions states, “Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?” For the “close social relationships” domain, one of the two questions states, “I am content with my friendships and relationships.” Participants rate themselves on a scale from 0 to 10, whereby higher scores indicate higher levels in each domain. Although no reliability research has been conducted with the adolescent version, the reliability of the Human Flourishing Index for a U.S. adult population is $\alpha = 0.89$ [28]. To minimize barriers to program buy-in, our team used a retrospective version of the survey whereby both students and advisors rated each question on the HFI at the end of the project. Specifically, participants were asked to rate each of the domains at two time points (i.e., “before SAFF” and “now, since participating in SAFF”) in the spring of 2023. Positive differences in ratings between the retrospective and current responses indicated growth in flourishing.

2.5.2. Interviews to Assess Activities, Satisfaction, and Changes in Levels of Flourishing

Interviews were conducted with eight advisors representing five of the seven schools. Focus groups were held with students for whom parental/guardian consent was secured. The number of consenting students participating in focus groups was limited to those who attended SAFF on the day of the focus group. In total, 21 consenting students participated in focus groups. These students represented six out of seven schools. None of the students who had parental/guardian consent at school #7 attended the focus group interview session.

Semi-structured protocols aligned with the research questions were used to facilitate interviews with advisors and focus groups with consenting students. For instance, advisors were asked about the program’s activities (i.e., recruitment, SAFF meeting activities and format, professional development, and support). All participants were asked about their overall satisfaction with the program and changes in knowledge and levels of flourishing (i.e., “To what extent did participating in the SAFF increase your knowledge of flourishing?”). In addition, SAFF advisors were also asked about their perceptions of students (e.g., “Have students enjoyed participating? Has students’ knowledge of the domains of flourishing increased?”).

2.6. Analytic Plan

Survey responses were downloaded from Qualtrics and data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (i.e., frequencies, means, etc.) in SPSS 29.0.1. The Human Flourishing Index (HFI) domain items were combined into one mean score across 10 items.

Interviews and focus groups were recorded via Zoom and transcribed using Ottr.ai. The interviewer reviewed the Ottr.ai transcripts for accuracy and revised them based on the audio recording. The third author coded the transcribed data by protocol question over a series of two passes. In addition to coding by interview questions, the third author used inductive thematic analysis to code each transcribed interview [29]. Inductive thematic analysis allowed the researcher to approach qualitative analysis without a predetermined coding framework or expected result. Instead, the themes emerged from the data through the iterative process of reading, re-reading, and analyzing the data. The third author conducted six passes through the interview transcripts to gain an in-depth understanding of the data and identify initial codes. After the transcripts were coded, the data were transferred into a spreadsheet according to the initial codes and sorted into broader themes. Three additional themes emerged across interviews: students’ perceived growth in self-confidence; advisors’ perceived deeper understanding of the students in SAFF; and both students’ and advisors’ sense of community and belonging.

Qualitative data were categorized and coded by the third author and an assistant independently. Given the use of inductive thematic analysis, interrater reliability was not

calculated [29]. Instead, the third author and the assistant met to discuss their independent coding and finalized themes through consensus-building [29].

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative (Survey) Results

In the section below, we report the survey data results by research question. Specifically, we highlight both advisor and student data in terms of program activities, overall satisfaction, and self-reported changes in levels of flourishing.

3.1.1. Participants' Reports on SAFF Program Activities

The survey focused on the activities implemented by advisors with students during the school year and their satisfaction with the program.

All advisors ($n = 10$; 100%) indicated that they discussed flourishing with students during SAFF. "Discussing flourishing" as an activity was followed by breathing exercises and gratitude circles, both selected by 90% of advisors ($n = 9$). Additionally, two advisors (20%) implemented activities not listed, including mindfulness exercises, reflective art, and nature walks.

The majority of student respondents ($n = 9$; 90%) indicated that they practiced breathing exercises, while 80% ($n = 8$) of students engaged in discussing flourishing and participating in gratitude circles. Additionally, a few students reported involvement in other activities such as games focused on flourishing, specific aspects of flourishing, and yoga.

3.1.2. Participants' Overall Satisfaction with SAFF

Advisors and students were asked to rate their satisfaction with SAFF and their likelihood to recommend it to peers on a scale from 0 to 10: "Overall, I am satisfied with the Student Alliance for Flourishing" and "I would recommend this program to my peers." Both advisors and students provided an identical mean response of 9.11 for both statements, indicating high levels of satisfaction and willingness to recommend the program from both groups.

3.1.3. Participants' Self-Reported Changes in Levels of Flourishing

Advisors' retrospective and current levels of flourishing indicated an increase of +0.76 from before participation to now. Advisors reported varying degrees of growth across the domains. Happiness and life satisfaction grew +0.81 points, while mental and physical health grew +1.09 points. Meaning and purpose grew by +0.88 points, character and virtue grew by +0.65 points, and relationships grew by +0.39 points (see Figure 2).

When examining students' changes on the Flourishing Index-Adolescent Version, the results indicate that students initially rated themselves lower in each domain compared to advisors, but they reported greater change between their before SAFF retrospective responses to after (see Figure 3).

3.2. Qualitative (Interview) Data

In the section below, we report data from the focus group interviews. The first section highlights advisor data in terms of factors for participation, preparation, and ongoing support; perspectives about the qualities and skills required to be SAFF advisors; program variation between schools; advisors' perceived outcomes for students participating in SAFF; and advisors' perspectives about their perceived outcomes of participating. The second section highlights students' experiences with SAFF in terms of introduction to the program, activities, satisfaction, and growth in flourishing.

3.3. Advisors' Experiences with SAFF

3.3.1. Factors Influencing Advisors' Decisions to Participate in SAFF

In the SAFF program advisor interviews, various factors influenced their decision to participate. For example, eight advisors were sourced through multiple channels, including

those from schools that continued their involvement from the previous year and new schools that recruited volunteers through email outreach ($n = 3$; 38%) or word of mouth ($n = 2$; 25%). Interestingly, three advisors indicated that they were somewhat “voluntold” to participate, implying a mix of voluntary and assigned participation.

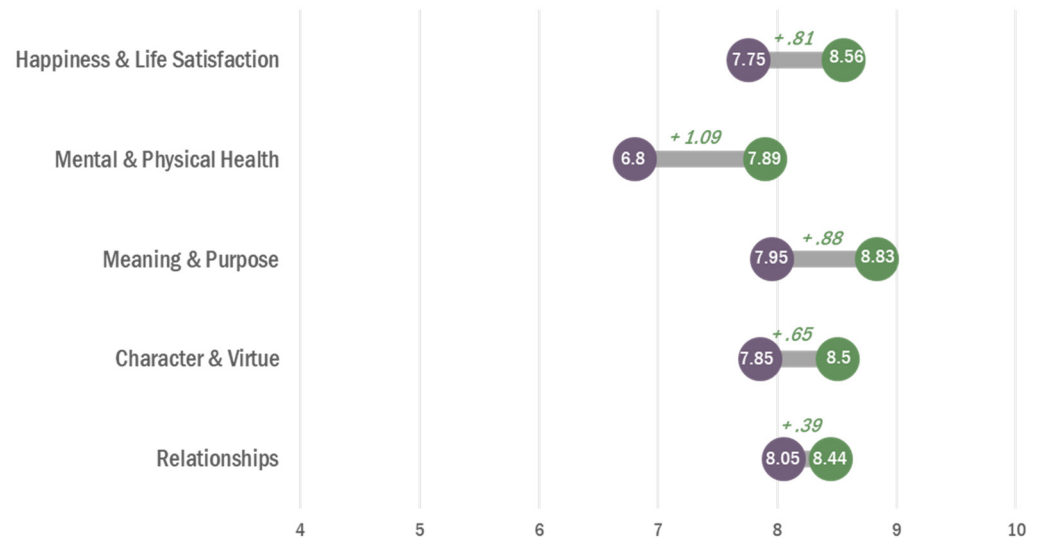


Figure 2. Flourishing domain growth for advisors from before SAFF to after. Note: $n = 10$.



Figure 3. Flourishing domain growth for students from before SAFF to after. Note: $n = 10$.

3.3.2. Advisor Preparation and Support

Regarding the advisors' preparation and ongoing support experiences, opinions were diverse. Some found the initial professional development meeting helpful, while others left with uncertainties about program implementation. However, as the school year progressed, advisors generally reported feeling more comfortable and confident in their roles. As one SAFF high school advisor (school #4) shared, “I enjoy collaborating with advisors from different schools because you get a good sense of what is available that you have not thought of yourself. It’s exchanging ideas and support.”

3.3.3. Advisors' Perspectives about the Qualities and Skill Sets Required

Concerning the qualities and skill sets required for advising on the program, about half of the advisors ($n = 4$; 50%) stressed the importance of skills related to their primary roles,

whether as teachers or counselors: “Some of that’s my classroom teaching and being clear and kind and setting up the expectations for how it’s going to go so that everybody feels safe and knows what to expect” (school #1). Advisors emphasized that having individuals from both mental health and teacher-trained backgrounds significantly contributed to the program’s success. Time management skills, belief in the flourishing philosophy, and a willingness to share their journey were also seen as crucial attributes.

3.3.4. SAFF Program Activity Variation between Schools

The implementation of SAFF across different schools revealed significant variation, encompassing differences in meeting structures, frequencies, and student participation levels. Challenges related to maintaining personnel consistency and student participation emerged, often due to advisors being pulled for other duties or students having conflicting commitments, as this school club period could often be usurped when students needed to complete assignments for other classes. As one advisor noted, “We had a couple of girls at the beginning of the year that were coming pretty regularly. And then, middle of the year, they said, ‘We can’t come because we have to go to our class that day, and do work or do whatever.’ So that’s tough.” (school #2). The most successful implementation occurred when students initially opted into SAFF with an expectation of ongoing participation and when schools prioritized advisors’ commitment to SAFF over other responsibilities.

3.3.5. Advisors’ Perceived Outcomes for Students Participating in SAFF

Advisors perceived positive outcomes for students participating in SAFF, with increased enjoyment reported by six out of eight advisors. Moreover, seven of the eight advisors believed that students’ knowledge of flourishing had increased due to their involvement, and half of them believed that students’ overall levels of flourishing had also improved ($n = 4$; 50%). SAFF was seen as a catalyst for increased confidence, social acceptance, and introspection among students. One advisor stated, “It gives them the opportunity to really dive deep within themselves, and then share themselves and put themselves on stage a little bit so that they can feel more understood and accepted” (school #3). Furthermore, it deepened interactions and supportiveness among students, as reported by five advisors. As one middle school advisor stated, “I think that when we had a couple of sixth graders that were coming regularly, we got to a place where everybody was vulnerable. And I feel like everybody was lifted up after we left” (school #6).

3.3.6. Advisors’ Perspectives about their Personal Outcomes of Participating

Finally, regarding the advisors’ perceived outcomes, the majority (seven out of eight; 88%) believed that their participation in SAFF had expanded their existing knowledge of flourishing and their desire to promote it among students and colleagues. As one advisor stated, “I think about the domains more than I would normally have ... running the club definitely impacts meaning and purpose for me. Happiness with my job. ... like it’s fun. The kids we have are great. It can’t help but make you feel good. So that in and of itself enhances my job satisfaction and feeling meaningful in what I do” (school #8). For some, SAFF provided a valuable framework and common language for discussing flourishing. Despite occasional challenges, leading SAFF was generally considered a positive experience ($n = 7$; 88%), especially in helping advisors identify personal struggles and areas for improvement. It even served as a source of support during challenging school years. As one advisor noted, “Individually, it’s been very good for me ... it’s helpful for me to kind of set the tone for the work week and keep that focus” (school #4). Three advisors particularly valued the opportunity to work closely with their co-advisors.

3.4. Student Experiences with SAFF

3.4.1. Student Recruitment and Introduction to the Program

Nearly half of the student participants (10 out of 21; 48%) first learned about SAFF through teachers or counselors. Four students were introduced to the program by friends,

while an additional four students heard about it during school morning announcements. When asked why they chose to participate in SAFF, nine students (43%) cited the attraction of it being “fun” or “cool.” Five students (24%) believed it would be personally beneficial, while another five (24%) felt that their participation would be beneficial for others. Four students (19%) expressed an interest in the program’s focus on mental health. Only one student (5%) mentioned that participation was mandatory at their school.

3.4.2. Students’ Perspectives on SAFF Activities and Operation

Approximately half of the students (10 out of 21; 48%) described SAFF as a platform for sharing their experiences concerning personal flourishing and the challenges they faced in achieving this. Eight students (38%) mentioned that they appreciated the practice of rating their flourishing on a scale at the beginning of each SAFF meeting. This self-assessment appeared to be an important element of their engagement in the program. Four students (19%) highlighted that they had the opportunity to have a say in how SAFF was run. They expressed that students within the program had the chance to provide input and influence the direction of SAFF activities. All students (100%) expressed their fondness for their SAFF advisors. Specifically, seven students (33%) described their advisors as “kind or nice,” and six students found their advisors to be “supportive, patient, or helpful.”

Five of the respondents (24%) expressed a desire for SAFF to continue operating in its current form. They reported satisfaction with the program’s existing structure and activities. Two students, however, offered constructive suggestions for enhancing SAFF (9%). Specifically, they recommended increasing student involvement in the decision-making process regarding SAFF’s operations and activities. Additionally, one student (5%) proposed the incorporation of more enjoyable and engaging activities during SAFF meetings. Two students (9%) expressed a desire for SAFF to meet more frequently than the current once-per-week schedule.

3.4.3. Students’ Perspectives on Satisfaction with the SAFF Program

The majority of students (15 out of 21; 71%) reported that they found their participation in SAFF enjoyable. Five students described SAFF as “fun,” highlighting the engaging and enjoyable nature of the program. An additional four students (19%) mentioned the pleasant and friendly interactions they experienced with their peers in SAFF. Three students (14%) appreciated the calm and supportive environment that SAFF provided, emphasizing its positive impact on their experience. Three students (14%) expressed their enjoyment of having the opportunity to engage with their peers and express themselves within the SAFF setting. A significant portion of students (8 out of 21; 38%) specifically mentioned their appreciation for crafting and making activities within SAFF, underlining the positive impact of these activities on their overall flourishing.

3.4.4. Students’ Perspectives on Personal Outcomes Resulting from SAFF Participation

All interviewed students ($n = 21$; 100%) reported positive outcomes on a personal level due to their involvement in SAFF and learning about flourishing. Nine students (43%) highlighted that their knowledge of flourishing and the ability to discuss their own experiences helped them cope with personal challenges. This aspect of self-awareness and reflection proved valuable in navigating the complexities of their lives. Some students ($n = 6$; 29%) mentioned that SAFF had improved their social skills by enabling meaningful conversations with peers, contributing to their personal growth and interpersonal effectiveness. Two students (10%) expressed that their participation in SAFF had helped them feel more worthy and capable, signifying a boost in self-esteem and confidence. As one student said, “I think it’s helped me with coping with things and in my life, making sure that I have someone to talk to, that you are feeling those ways. And it definitely took a weight off my shoulders a little bit to know that I am capable and worthy and that I can flourish. ... I can be the person I want to be under my circumstances” (school #5).

In terms of their wider community, students reported an increased sense of empathy and understanding ($n = 4$; 19%) and believed they were able to directly impact the lives of others through their participation in SAFF and their understanding of flourishing. One student mentioned a sense of belonging: “You can feel like yourself when you’re in this club... And it makes me like, want to come to school” (school #2). Most students mentioned that they continued to practice the skills and utilize the tools they learned in SAFF in their everyday lives. Specifically, they engaged in mindfulness practices ($n = 4$; 19%), implemented coping skills ($n = 4$; 19%), and practiced breathing exercises ($n = 3$; 14%). Additionally, students reported participating in activities that promote flourishing, such as exercise, journaling, coloring, reading, and music.

4. Discussion

As mentioned previously, there is little empirical research on promoting flourishing in schools with both educators and students. Given the paucity of research, we will discuss our findings in light of previous research on flourishing in schools [15–18], particularly with regard to theory, methods, and findings.

Similar to previous research [15–18], we sought to conduct a study on flourishing in schools. Much like the work of Cherkowski and colleagues, who draw their theoretical groundings from principles of positive organizational studies, positive psychology, mentoring in education, appreciative inquiry, and strength-based research, we too ground our intervention in psychological theory (i.e., Self-Determination Theory and Flourishing [21]). Moreover, and similar to Hampson [17], we sought to contribute to the literature by using VanderWeele’s five domains of flourishing [8], activities for flourishing [25] and the Human Flourishing Index [8], thereby extending previous research on flourishing that used the PERMA model of well-being [18].

While much of the research has been either qualitative [15,16] or quantitative [18], we analyzed both qualitative and quantitative data to evaluate SAFF. Using such an approach is a reliable measure of human flourishing [27]. Moreover, of the empirical studies of flourishing in schools, many have been conducted outside of the U.S. [15–18]. Schools differ by country; as such, our U.S.-based study adds to the research in terms of cultural contexts in which flourishing research is conducted in schools.

Furthermore, similar to Cherkowski and colleagues’ work [15,16], we sought to collect rich data on the experiences of educators who participated in an intervention. Therefore, we too used focus group conversations and found our own themes emerging about the promise of SAFF as an intervention in schools. Although Cherkowski and colleagues’ work was with administrators [16], it is clear that educators also value meaning and purpose in their careers, as outlined by one advisor who said that advising the club increased her meaning and purpose. By integrating the domains of human flourishing outlined by VanderWeele [8], we fostered, supported, and encouraged flourishing with educators and students in schools. By adopting a strengths-based approach, supported by Deci and Ryan’s theory of SDT, we encouraged advisors’ competence to lead the program.

Similar to Laakso and colleagues [18] who found positive results as a result of intervention participation, our findings also revealed positive results in that students felt worthy, capable, and like their “authentic” selves as a result of participating, and one student even expressed wanting to come to school as a positive outcome of participating in SAFF. In their study, Hampson and colleagues [17] found that the average level of flourishing was 70/100; our results indicate that students’ average ratings before participating in SAFF were lower than the students at Sevenoaks School (60.38) and higher (77) than these students after participating in SAFF. Similar to existent research [18], our findings show that students in SAFF also participated in mindfulness activities less than students at Sevenoaks, but, unlike the group at Sevenoaks, students and advisors ranked “gratitude circles” among one of the most often used activities. More research is needed to determine the benefit of integrating gratitude as a flourishing intervention. In addition, students in the current study engaged in coping skills, practiced breathing exercises, journaled, colored, read,

exercised, and listened to music. Lastly, Hampson and colleagues [17] stated a desire to design and evaluate the impact of interventions on students. In this project, we evaluated the impact of an intervention on both students' and advisors' levels of flourishing.

4.1. Study Limitations

To adequately report on this intervention study, it is necessary to acknowledge its limitations and areas for improvement. First, this was a small sample of both advisors and students, so the results are not generalizable to other populations. Upon reflection and speaking to advisors at the conclusion of this study, we recognized that time is a valuable resource that participants may find challenging to share if there is no perceived direct benefit. As such, offering students and advisors incentives for completing consent forms to either participate or not participate in the data collection may have increased the number of participants who completed evaluation activities. Second, there may have been selection bias in the data as the advisors and students who were satisfied with the program may have been more likely to give extra time to complete the surveys and participate in the interviews. Involving a larger sample of participants may have added to the diversity of student perspectives regarding the program. Third, the flourishing measure was modified to be retrospective in nature, which may have lent itself to biased reporting due to recall. It is important to note, however, that the retrospective nature of the measure was purposeful in our study's design, given the importance of buy-in from students and advisors alike. As such, we did not want to lead with a research request from advisors and students before relationship-building occurred. Hence, we purposely only collected post-intervention data that asked participants to recall their flourishing levels before joining SAFF. We recognize the limitations of this design in terms of research, but we saw this decision as a necessity in garnering buy-in for this project. Our team was focused on the potential of helping advisors and students to flourish during a time of extreme stress following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, we recognize that there was no control group in our study. Given the nature of the retrospective study design, a control group was not necessary as participants used their recall to determine the extent to which their levels of flourishing changed "before SAFF" compared to "now". Given that there was no control group, however, we cannot be certain that SAFF was the reason for this change in participants' perspectives regarding their flourishing scores. Moreover, we did not collect information on dosage, so we are unable to know whether participant attendance was associated with changes in flourishing scores. Collecting anonymous attendance data in future studies will likely be beneficial. Additionally, given the nature of recruiting, it is challenging to determine the exact number of students who participated in the program throughout the year. Specifically, SAFF was offered as a "club" activity whereby students were allowed to choose among a variety of activities to attend (i.e., academic coaching, sports, hobbies, and other high-interest "free-time" activities). It is also important to note that one advisor took FMLA leave and could no longer co-advise the SAFF program. The remaining advisor at the school reported that they were not able to lead the group alone, so the school ultimately dropped out of the study. Although these circumstances were beyond our control, we want to emphasize the importance of having two advisors lead each group to the greatest extent possible.

4.2. Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Future Implementation

Limitations aside, the work of developing the next generation of flourishing individuals should not cease, and, to that end, we posit several recommendations for future implementation. Specifically, we propose refinements with regard to the content, process, and evaluative aspects of this project. Concerning content, we suggest including advisors' ideas for students and adults from last year into next year's handbook. Based on student feedback, we also recommend more student input in how clubs are run. Lastly, we recommend continuing to ground the program using a book related to flourishing content; it will be beneficial to

receive advisors' input on selecting the book. We see these recommendations as salient because they add the "competence" aspect of SDT to SAFF programming.

In terms of process, there is a need for a deeper commitment to incorporating and examining the impact of community service on student and advisor flourishing. Thus, we recommend that future iterations connect students in the project with each other, especially students in "feeder schools," and connect middle school advisors with high school advisors where students will transition to high school. In future iterations, we also recommend having meetings where students can meet with each other, either in person or virtually, and have students collaborate on community projects, either nationally or even internationally. In addition, encouraging advisors to incorporate parents into our project by holding in-person or online meetings that teach parents about flourishing so that they can support their children's flourishing would also be beneficial for future iterations. Making these additional connections (i.e., within the district, internationally, and with parents) will be beneficial to strengthening the "relatedness" component of SDT within SAFF programming.

Lastly, we seek to incorporate the Student Alliance for Flourishing into the existing multi-tiered system to support flourishing [14] and examine additional outcomes that are relevant to this work. For instance, given our focus on ensuring we use Self-Determination Theory as the basis of this work, we seek to examine the connection between flourishing and educator empowerment. We envision SAFF advisors as flourishing liaisons, whereby they will be able to support teachers in integrating flourishing content into lesson plans and offering flourishing coaching to teachers in their schools. Evaluating the efficacy of such integration and coaching will add to the current literature and strengthen the "autonomy" component of SDT within SAFF programming.

5. Conclusions

Given the ongoing impact of COVID-19, curriculum disputes, technology overload, and the emerging influence of artificial intelligence in education, we propose the Student Alliance for Flourishing as a promising approach to support faculty and student comprehensive well-being. The Student Alliance for Flourishing can encourage students to live out their highest ideals, vocations, and aspirations by motivating them to regularly engage with the domains of flourishing (i.e., happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, close social relationships, character and virtue, and meaning and purpose). We present these results to empower educators, administrators, and researchers to find a well-being initiative that works for them and their school's population; garner buy-in through the SDT lens of autonomy, competence, and relatedness; and then tailor it to make it their own. No one theory or construct can meet the wellness needs of every K-12 faculty and student; however, we can increase buy-in when we prioritize student and faculty autonomy, scaffold new learning towards competence, and ensure a sense of community and relatedness with others. In our minds, many educational policy reforms would benefit from acknowledging these three basic principles of self-determination.

Although this study highlighted the promising approach of SAFF, this initiative is still in development and we continually refine it each year. In the future, we envision more empowered educators and students using the tools introduced by SAFF to move towards their highest versions of themselves, in ways that work best for them, and with communities of support. Ultimately, this type of research–practice partnership has the potential to make our school communities stronger, our students happier, and our teachers more empowered. We look forward to witnessing how future flourishing initiatives will contribute to the growth of individuals in the years to come.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, K.E.L. and M.S.D.; Methodology, B.-A.T.; Formal analysis, B.-A.T.; Investigation, K.E.L., M.S.D. and B.-A.T.; Data curation, B.-A.T.; Writing—original draft, K.E.L., M.S.D., B.-A.T. and A.L.J.; Writing—review & editing, K.E.L., M.S.D., B.-A.T. and A.L.J.; Supervision, K.E.L.; Project administration, K.E.L. and M.S.D.; Funding acquisition, K.E.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research project was supported by funding through the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund (ESSER I and II–84.425D; ARP ESSER—84.425U) given to state and local education agencies by the U.S. Department of Education.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Notre Dame of Maryland University (# E2219050102L; 19 May 2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Due to the small sample size and funding agency constraints, access to the data informing this study are limited to the research team. Please contact the first author with questions.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank Amrita Chaturvedi and Tara Segree for their contributions to earlier iterations of this project, as well as Sydney Miller and Taylor Bynion for providing administrative support. We would also like to thank members of the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University, particularly the Senior Fellows and Matthew T. Lee for their continued encouragement. Lastly, we would like to thank the SAFF students, advisors, and district personnel with whom we worked.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

Appendix A. Flourishing Index—Adolescent Version

Please respond to the following questions on a scale from 0 to 10:

1. Overall, how satisfied are you with life as a whole these days?
0 = Not Satisfied at All, 10 = Completely Satisfied _____
2. In general I consider myself a happy person
0 = Strongly Disagree, 10 = Strongly Agree _____
3. In general, how would you rate your physical health?
0 = Poor, 10 = Excellent _____
4. How would you rate your overall mental health?
0 = Poor, 10 = Excellent _____
5. Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?
0 = Not at All Worthwhile, 10 = Completely Worthwhile _____
6. I am doing things now that will help me achieve my goals in life.
0 = Strongly Disagree, 10 = Strongly Agree _____
7. I always act to promote good in all circumstances, even in difficult and challenging situations.
0 = Not True of Me, 10 = Completely True of Me _____
8. I am always able to give up some happiness now for greater happiness later.
0 = Not True of Me, 10 = Completely True of Me _____
9. I am content with my friendships and relationships.
0 = Strongly Disagree, 10 = Strongly Agree _____
10. I have people in my life I can talk to about things that really matter.
0 = Strongly Disagree, 10 = Strongly Agree _____
11. My family has enough money to live a truly decent life.
0 = Strongly Disagree, 10 = Strongly Agree _____
12. How often do you worry about safety, food, or housing?
0 = Worry All of the Time, 10 = Do Not Ever Worry _____

These 12 items have been adapted for use with adolescents (generally 12–18 years old, but possibly younger) to assess several important domains of flourishing including Happiness and Life Satisfaction (Items 1–2), Mental and Physical Health (Items 3–4), Meaning and Purpose (Items 5–6), Character and Virtue (Items 7–8), and Close Social Relationships (Items 9–10). A sixth domain, Financial and Material Stability (Items 11–12) is an important means to sustain the other domains over time. The background and motivation for most of these items and the flourishing domains can be found in VanderWeele, T. J. (2017). On the promotion of human flourishing. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, U.S.A.*, 31:8148–8156 [8]. For more information about this measure, please visit the Human Flourishing Program, at Harvard University Program Website: [https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/files/pik/files/flourishingsurvey_adolescentversion.docx#:~:text=These%2012%20items%20have%20been,-8\),%20and%20Close%20Social](https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/files/pik/files/flourishingsurvey_adolescentversion.docx#:~:text=These%2012%20items%20have%20been,-8),%20and%20Close%20Social) (accessed on 22 March 2024).

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