

# Psychological Implications of High-Stakes Secondary School Examinations: A Comparative Analysis of Telangana SSC, CBSE, and ICSE Boards in Post-COVID India

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**Abstract** Secondary school public examinations in India represent a critical academic milestone and are often accompanied by intense institutional and societal expectations. Among these, Class 10 examinations conducted by different education boards function as high-stakes assessments that significantly influence students' academic trajectories. In the post-COVID context, these pressures have been further intensified by prolonged disruptions in learning, increased digital exposure, and noticeable behavioural and emotional changes among adolescents. This paper presents a conceptual and policy-oriented comparative analysis of the psychological implications of high-stakes secondary school examinations across three major examination systems in India: the Telangana State Secondary School Certificate (SSC) system, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), and the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (ICSE). Drawing upon official examination schedules, district-level academic action plans, and existing psychological and educational literature, the paper examines how variations in examination structure, accountability mechanisms, and performance-driven targets shape distinct stress patterns among Class 10 students. The analysis highlights that state-level SSC systems, with a strong emphasis on single-exam outcomes and district performance metrics, tend to foster fear-based compliance and performance anxiety. In contrast, CBSE's standardized national framework and ICSE's academically intensive curriculum generate stress through competitive comparison, cognitive overload, and heightened perfectionism. The study further discusses how post-pandemic digital immersion, social media exposure, and reduced coping resilience interact with board-specific academic demands, increasing students' psychological vulnerability. The paper argues that an exclusive focus on pass percentages and institutional rankings inadequately addresses students' mental well-being and long-term learning outcomes. It concludes by advocating for a more psychologically informed assessment approach that balances academic accountability with emotional resilience, student well-being, and sustainable educational success in secondary education.

**Keywords:** High-stakes examinations; Student psychology; Secondary education; Post-COVID learning; SSC; CBSE; ICSE

## I Introduction

Secondary school education in India culminates in a high-stakes public examination at the end of Class 10, which serves as a decisive academic and psychological milestone for adolescents. Performance in these examinations often determines students' access to academic streams, institutional opportunities, and perceived future success. Consequently, Class 10 examinations have gradually evolved from a measure of learning achievement into a dominant performance indicator for schools, teachers, and education systems.

India's secondary education landscape is characterized by the coexistence of multiple examination boards, including state-level boards and national boards such as the Central Board of Secondary

Education (CBSE) and the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (ICSE). While these boards follow distinct curricular frameworks and assessment philosophies, all of them conduct high-stakes examinations at the secondary level that exert considerable academic pressure on students. The Telangana State Secondary School Certificate (SSC) system, in particular, places strong emphasis on single-exam outcomes, district-level performance targets, and administrative accountability, often translating into intense academic monitoring at the school level.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted formal schooling, leading to prolonged closures, increased reliance on digital learning platforms, and reduced face-to-face academic and social interactions. As schools resumed regular functioning, students returned to classrooms with altered learning habits, reduced attention spans, and heightened emotional sensitivity. In this post-pandemic context, the re-emergence of exam-centric practices and institutional demands for improved pass percentages has raised important questions regarding students' psychological well-being and coping capacity.

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by emotional regulation challenges, identity formation, and heightened sensitivity to evaluation and failure [1,2]. Excessive academic pressure during this period has been associated in educational psychology literature with performance anxiety, fear of failure, burnout, and maladaptive coping behaviours [3,4]. These concerns become more pronounced when academic expectations are reinforced through rigid schedules, continuous assessments, extended instructional hours, and outcome-oriented accountability mechanisms.

Against this backdrop, the present paper seeks to critically examine the psychological implications of high-stakes Class 10 examinations within a comparative framework. By analysing the examination structures and accountability cultures of the Telangana SSC system, CBSE, and ICSE boards, the study aims to highlight how different assessment models may shape distinct patterns of stress, anxiety, and behavioural responses among students. Situating this analysis within the post-COVID educational environment, the paper argues for the need to reconsider result-centric success metrics and to integrate psychological well-being as a core component of secondary education policy and practice.

## II Overview of Secondary School Boards and Examination Structures in India

India's school education system operates through multiple examination boards that differ in curriculum design, assessment philosophy, and governance. At the secondary level (Class 10), these boards conduct public examinations (or board examinations) that function as key certification and transition points for students. Although the broad purpose of these examinations is similar—certifying completion of secondary schooling and guiding progression to higher secondary education—the structural features of the exams and the institutional culture around performance vary significantly across boards.

### II.a State Boards and the SSC Model

Most Indian states operate their own boards of secondary education responsible for curriculum implementation and public examinations at the end of Class 10. In several states, the Class 10 certification is commonly referred to as the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) or an equivalent terminology. State board examinations are typically centralized, syllabus-bound, and conducted within a fixed schedule under uniform regulations. Because state governments and district administrations frequently monitor performance indicators such as pass percentage, attendance, and district ranking, state board systems often develop strong accountability mechanisms that influence school-level practices, remedial strategies, and exam preparation routines.

Within the Telangana SSC context, the examination is treated as a critical district-level performance metric. Preparatory interventions may include special classes, repeated testing, and continuous monitoring to improve results. Such mechanisms can increase academic structure and support, but

they may also intensify psychological pressure when performance targets become the dominant measure of success.

## **II.b Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE)**

The CBSE is a national-level board with a standardized curriculum framework followed by a large number of schools across India. At the Class 10 level, CBSE conducts board examinations aligned with its academic standards and assessment model. Compared with many state-board contexts, CBSE commonly integrates a broader assessment approach through internal evaluation components and uniform national guidelines. However, CBSE students also experience pressure arising from competitive peer comparison, coaching dependence, and the perceived importance of board results for future academic opportunities—particularly in urban and semi-urban contexts.

## **II.c Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE)**

The ICSE (conducted by CISCE) represents another prominent national-level examination system in India. ICSE is widely perceived as academically rigorous, often characterized by detailed syllabi, strong emphasis on language proficiency, and a comparatively intensive curriculum. The Class 10 examination under ICSE becomes psychologically demanding not only due to performance expectations but also due to cognitive workload and the need for sustained academic consistency across subjects. Students in this system may therefore experience stress patterns associated with cognitive overload, perfectionistic performance orientation, and high self-expectation, especially when combined with strong parental and institutional pressure.

## **II.d Why Board Differences Matter for Student Psychology**

While all three systems—Telangana SSC, CBSE, and ICSE—operate within the same developmental stage of adolescence, the assessment environment differs in ways that can shape distinct psychological outcomes:

- Assessment structure (single-exam dominance vs mixed evaluation approaches) influences perceived stakes and fear of failure.
- Curriculum load and learning demands affect cognitive fatigue and burnout vulnerability.
- Accountability culture (district ranking, school comparisons, institutional targets) affects how pressure is transmitted from administration to teachers, parents, and students.
- Social context (peer competition, coaching culture, parental expectations) modifies how students interpret academic success and self-worth.

Therefore, a comparative understanding of board examination systems is essential for analyzing how exam stress develops, how it is reinforced, and why students from different boards may exhibit different behavioural and emotional responses—particularly in the post-COVID educational environment where coping reserves have been weakened and digital influences have intensified.

## **III Examination Pressure and Accountability Mechanisms**

High-stakes examinations exert psychological influence not only through syllabus content and evaluation patterns, but also through the accountability mechanisms embedded within examination systems. At the secondary level, accountability operates across multiple layers—administrative authorities, schools, teachers, parents, and ultimately students. The intensity and direction of this pressure vary across boards, shaping how academic expectations are experienced and internalized by learners.

### **III.a Accountability Structures in State SSC Systems**

In state board contexts such as the Telangana SSC system, accountability is strongly outcome-oriented. Examination performance is frequently treated as a measurable indicator of institutional efficiency at the district and school levels. Administrative directives often emphasize targets such as improved pass percentages, full attendance during examination periods, and systematic identification of academically weak students. These expectations translate into school-level practices including extended instructional hours, frequent testing, special coaching sessions, and close monitoring of student progress.

While such measures are designed to support academic achievement, they can also create a climate where examination results become the dominant definition of success. From a psychological perspective, this environment may foster fear-based motivation, where students engage in learning primarily to avoid failure rather than to achieve mastery. Adolescents subjected to persistent monitoring and outcome pressure may experience heightened performance anxiety, reduced autonomy, and diminished intrinsic motivation, particularly when academic effort is framed as an obligation rather than a developmental process.

### **III.b Accountability in National Board Systems**

National boards such as CBSE and ICSE also operate under accountability expectations, though the mechanisms differ in form and intensity. In these systems, accountability is often mediated through standardized national curricula, internal assessment components, and school-level academic benchmarking. While there may be less direct district-level pressure compared to state SSC systems, competition among schools, parental expectations, and coaching cultures can produce indirect yet substantial performance stress.

CBSE's standardized framework may distribute pressure across multiple assessment components, potentially reducing the psychological weight of a single examination. However, the competitive environment associated with national-level benchmarking can intensify social comparison and self-evaluation among students. ICSE's academically intensive curriculum, coupled with detailed evaluation standards, may shift accountability toward sustained academic consistency, increasing cognitive and emotional demands over a longer duration.

### **III.c Transmission of Pressure to Students**

Across all board systems, accountability pressures are rarely experienced in isolation. Instead, they are transmitted through adults—teachers, school leaders, and parents—who themselves are subject to performance expectations. When teachers are evaluated primarily on examination outcomes, pedagogical practices may shift toward test-oriented instruction. Parents, influenced by institutional messaging and social comparison, may reinforce result-centric expectations at home. For adolescents, this convergence of pressures can create an environment where academic performance becomes closely tied to self-worth and perceived future security.

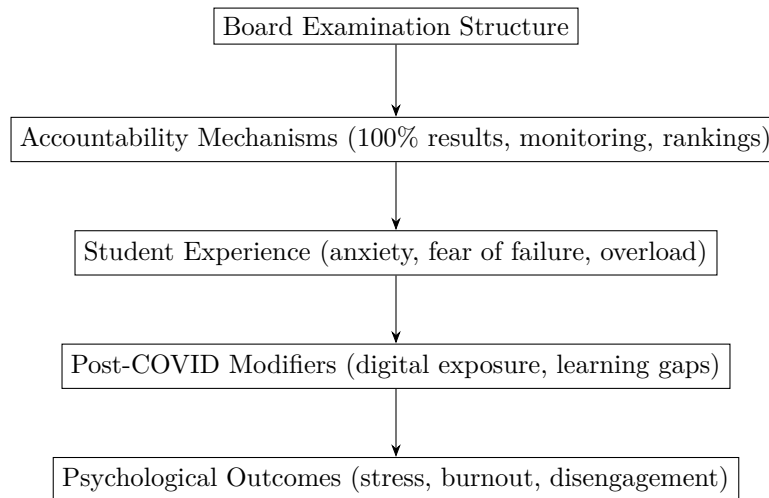
Psychological literature suggests that such environments can contribute to emotional distress, especially during adolescence, a developmental stage marked by heightened sensitivity to evaluation and failure [5,6]. In post-COVID contexts, where students have already experienced academic disruption and emotional strain, the reintroduction of rigid accountability frameworks may further challenge coping capacity and resilience.

### **III.d Implications for Student Well-Being**

The analysis of accountability mechanisms across board systems indicates that examination pressure is not solely a function of curriculum difficulty or exam format, but also of how performance expectations are institutionalized and communicated. Systems that prioritize numerical outcomes and rankings

without parallel attention to emotional support risk amplifying anxiety, burnout, and disengagement among students. Conversely, accountability models that balance academic standards with psychological awareness may foster healthier achievement orientations and more sustainable learning outcomes.

This understanding underscores the need to examine high-stakes examinations not only as assessment tools, but as psychological environments that shape adolescent behaviour, motivation, and well-being.



## IV Psychological Impact of High-Stakes Examinations on Adolescents (Pre-COVID vs Post-COVID Perspective)

High-stakes examinations influence adolescent psychology through multiple pathways, including fear of failure, social comparison, identity-related stress, and reduced perceived control over outcomes. Because Class 10 examinations often function as decisive gatekeepers for higher secondary options, students may interpret exam performance as a judgment of personal worth rather than a measure of academic learning. This section explains how such exams shape psychological responses in adolescents and how the COVID-19 pandemic has altered student behaviour and coping capacity.

### IV.a Adolescence and Vulnerability to Examination Stress

Adolescence is a developmental stage characterized by rapid cognitive, emotional, and social changes. Students in Class 10 typically experience heightened sensitivity to evaluation, increased dependence on peer feedback, and a stronger need for approval from adults. In this stage, academic outcomes often become closely linked to self-esteem and future identity formation. When examinations are framed as "life-determining," students may develop:

- Performance anxiety (persistent worry about results and evaluation)
- Fear of failure (avoidance behaviours, negative self-talk, reduced confidence)
- Stress-related somatic symptoms (sleep disturbance, headaches, appetite changes)
- Reduced emotional regulation (irritability, emotional outbursts, withdrawal)

These outcomes become more pronounced when preparation is driven by surveillance, repeated testing, strict discipline, or social comparison—conditions common in many high-stakes exam environments.

## **IV.b Pre-COVID Student Behaviour in Examination Contexts**

Before the pandemic, examination stress was already a dominant feature of secondary education, but students typically experienced a more stable routine with consistent classroom interaction. Common pre-COVID behavioural patterns in Class 10 exam preparation included:

- Structured teacher-led instruction and face-to-face clarification
- Moderate reliance on coaching and supplementary materials
- Social learning through peer interaction
- Predictable school schedules supporting routine-based study habits

While academic pressure existed, many students benefited from regular academic scaffolding and stable psychosocial environments at school.

## **IV.c Post-COVID Behavioural Shifts and Reduced Coping Resilience**

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted formal schooling, reduced daily structure, and limited peer interaction for extended periods. When students returned to offline schooling, many displayed behavioural and learning patterns that differed noticeably from pre-COVID cohorts. Post-pandemic Class 10 students often show:

- Reduced attention span and lower tolerance for sustained academic tasks
- Increased dependence on digital stimulation and difficulty engaging in deep study
- Learning gaps and reduced academic confidence, contributing to fear-based preparation
- Weakened study routines, making intensive exam preparation more stressful
- Higher baseline anxiety, due to uncertainty, disrupted academic identity, and social adjustment challenges

These changes are critical because the same high-stakes exam system now operates on a student population that may have fewer psychological resources and weaker coping strategies than earlier cohorts.

## **IV.d Examination Pressure and Maladaptive Coping**

In both pre- and post-COVID contexts, prolonged exam pressure can lead some adolescents toward maladaptive coping patterns. These may include avoidance (skipping classes, procrastination), emotional withdrawal, aggressive behaviour, or excessive dependence on external motivation. In the post-COVID phase, such coping issues may be amplified by increased access to digital distractions, social media-driven comparison, and limited emotional support structures.

It is important to frame these risks cautiously: high-stakes examination pressure does not directly "cause" maladaptive behaviours in every student. Rather, it may increase vulnerability, particularly among students facing learning gaps, family stress, or reduced psychosocial support.

## **IV.e Summary**

The psychological impact of Class 10 examinations is shaped by adolescent developmental sensitivity and the high-stakes framing of academic success. Post-COVID students enter the same examination environment with altered behavioural patterns, reduced coping resilience, and stronger digital dependence, making them more vulnerable to anxiety, burnout, and disengagement. These realities demand that examination preparation strategies and accountability frameworks be re-evaluated through a psychological lens, especially when performance targets dominate educational planning.

Table 1: Conceptual comparison of student learning and behavioural characteristics before and after COVID-19

Aspect	Pre-COVID Students	Post-COVID Students
Attention Span	Relatively stable	Reduced
Study Habits	Routine-based	Fragmented
Coping Ability	Moderate	Weakened
Digital Exposure	Limited	High

## V Digital Exposure, Social Media Influence, and Learning Behaviour in Class 10 Students

The post-COVID educational environment has significantly increased adolescents' exposure to digital technology, reshaping learning behaviour, attention patterns, and emotional regulation. While digital tools played a crucial role in sustaining education during school closures, their prolonged and largely unregulated use has introduced new psychological challenges, particularly for students preparing for high-stakes Class 10 examinations.

### V.a Expansion of Digital Dependence after COVID-19

During the pandemic, online classes, recorded lessons, and mobile-based learning became primary modes of instruction. For many students, digital devices shifted from being supplementary academic tools to constant companions. Even after the return to offline schooling, high levels of screen exposure persisted, influencing how students engage with learning tasks. Post-COVID Class 10 students often demonstrate difficulty sustaining attention during long study sessions, reduced patience for textbook-based learning, and a preference for short, visually stimulating content [7,8].

From a psychological perspective, excessive screen exposure can alter reward-processing mechanisms, making slow and effortful academic tasks feel less engaging. This mismatch between examination demands and students' digital-conditioned attention patterns increases frustration and academic fatigue during exam preparation.

### V.b Social Media and Adolescent Psychological Stress

Social media platforms play a central role in adolescents' social lives, identity formation, and self-evaluation. For Class 10 students, social media exposure intersects with academic pressure in multiple ways. Online comparison with peers, exposure to curated success narratives, and constant performance visibility can intensify feelings of inadequacy and fear of failure. Students may internalize unrealistic standards of success, particularly when academic achievement is publicly discussed or indirectly measured through peer status.

In examination contexts, social media can disrupt sleep routines, increase cognitive overload, and fragment attention, further weakening students' capacity to cope with academic stress. The psychological impact is not uniform; while some students use digital platforms for support and motivation, others experience heightened anxiety, distraction, and emotional dysregulation.

### V.c Digital Learning versus Deep Learning

High-stakes examinations such as Class 10 board exams require sustained concentration, conceptual understanding, and long-term memory consolidation. However, prolonged exposure to fast-paced digital content may reduce students' tolerance for deep learning processes. Many post-COVID students show

a tendency toward surface learning strategies, including memorization without comprehension and last-minute intensive study, which can increase anxiety and reduce confidence.

This shift becomes particularly problematic in examination systems that emphasize comprehensive syllabus coverage and cumulative assessment. When students rely heavily on digital shortcuts without adequate conceptual grounding, examination preparation becomes more stressful and emotionally exhausting.

#### V.d Interaction between Digital Exposure and Examination Pressure

Digital exposure does not operate independently of examination stress; rather, it interacts with existing academic pressure. Under intense exam preparation demands, students may turn to digital platforms as a coping mechanism to escape stress, leading to a cycle of avoidance and guilt. Over time, this pattern can undermine self-discipline, reduce perceived academic control, and intensify emotional distress as examinations approach.

In the post-COVID context, where institutional expectations and accountability mechanisms remain high, the psychological gap between students' digital habits and examination requirements becomes more pronounced. This gap may partially explain increased reports of restlessness, disengagement, and emotional volatility among secondary school students.

#### V.e Summary

Digital exposure and social media influence have become integral components of adolescents' psychological environments. For Class 10 students facing high-stakes examinations, excessive and unstructured digital engagement can exacerbate attention difficulties, increase social comparison anxiety, and weaken deep learning capacities. While digital tools offer educational opportunities, their psychological impact must be considered when designing examination preparation strategies and student support systems. Recognizing the interaction between digital behaviour and exam-related stress is essential for promoting healthier learning habits and emotional resilience in secondary education.

### VI Integrated Scientific Modelling

This section presents a mathematical and statistical modelling framework to quantify the relationships between examination structures, student characteristics, and psychological outcomes. Drawing on recent empirical work [9–12], the models capture both direct and mediated effects.

#### VI.a Structural Equation Model (SEM)

For each board type  $b$  (SSC, CBSE, ICSE), the following equations represent the hypothesized relationships:

$$\eta_{\text{anxiety},b} = \gamma_1 \eta_{\text{efficacy},b} + \gamma_2 \xi_{\text{relationships},b} + \gamma_3 \xi_{\text{classroom},b} + \zeta_b \quad (1)$$

$$\eta_{\text{efficacy},b} = \beta_1 \xi_{\text{relationships},b} + \beta_2 \xi_{\text{classroom},b} + \varepsilon_b \quad (2)$$

where  $\eta$  are endogenous latent variables,  $\xi$  are exogenous latent variables, and  $\zeta, \varepsilon$  are error terms.

## VI.b Mediation Model

Academic engagement is predicted by self-regulation, social support, and educational stress, with educational stress serving as a mediator:

$$\text{Academic Engagement}_b = \alpha + \beta_1(\text{Self-Regulation}_b) + \beta_2(\text{Social Support}_b) + \beta_3(\text{Educational Stress}_b) + \varepsilon_b \quad (3)$$

$$\text{Educational Stress}_b = \delta_0 + \delta_1(\text{Self-Regulation}_b) + \delta_2(\text{Social Support}_b) + \nu_b \quad (4)$$

## VI.c Logistic Regression Risk Model

The probability that a student experiences high stress is modelled as:

$$P(\text{High Stress}_b = 1 | X) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(\alpha + \beta_1 X_1 + \dots + \beta_k X_k)}}$$

where  $X$  includes board type, gender, digital usage, teacher support, and peer relationship quality.

## VI.d Board-Specific Stress Profile Index (SPI)

To compare cumulative stress across boards, we define:

$$\text{SPI}_b = w_1 S_{1b} + w_2 S_{2b} + w_3 S_{3b} + w_4 S_{4b}$$

where  $S_{1b}$  to  $S_{4b}$  represent stress dimensions (e.g., outcome dependency, curriculum intensity, digital exposure, accountability pressure) and  $w_i$  are empirically derived weights. Higher SPI values indicate greater cumulative stress influence.

## VI.e Extended Scientific Modelling

A stress function captures the combined effect of key drivers:

$$S = \alpha O + \beta C + \gamma D + \delta A + \varepsilon$$

where

- $S$  = Stress Level
- $O$  = Outcome Dependency
- $C$  = Curriculum Intensity
- $D$  = Digital Exposure
- $A$  = Accountability Pressure
- $\varepsilon$  = Residual Psychological Factors

## VI.f Structural Equation Extension

Anxiety is expressed as a function of internal and external factors:

$$\text{Anxiety} = \lambda_1(\text{Self-Efficacy}) + \lambda_2(\text{Accountability Pressure}) + \lambda_3(\text{Digital Exposure}) + \zeta$$

## VI.g Extended Risk Prediction Model

The extended logistic model includes board-specific interactions:

$$P(\text{High Stress} = 1 | X) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(\alpha + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_k X_k)}}$$

## **VII Emerging Risk Behaviours and Psychological Vulnerability under Examination Stress**

High-stakes examination environments do not affect all students uniformly. While many adolescents cope with academic pressure through adaptive strategies, a subset of students may develop psychological vulnerability that increases the likelihood of maladaptive behaviours. In the post-COVID educational context, these vulnerabilities are shaped by a convergence of academic stress, weakened coping mechanisms, and altered social environments.

### **VII.a Examination Stress as a Vulnerability Factor**

It is important to make a clear academic distinction: examination pressure does not directly cause risky or maladaptive behaviours. However, sustained academic stress—particularly when combined with fear of failure, loss of perceived control, and constant evaluation—can function as a vulnerability factor. Adolescents experiencing chronic stress may seek immediate relief or distraction, especially when healthier coping resources are unavailable or underdeveloped.

In Class 10 contexts where examinations are framed as decisive and irreversible, students who struggle academically or emotionally may experience feelings of helplessness, low self-efficacy, and emotional exhaustion. These psychological states can increase susceptibility to maladaptive coping responses.

### **VII.b Behavioural Responses to Prolonged Academic Pressure**

Under intense and prolonged examination pressure, some students may exhibit behavioural changes such as:

- Avoidance behaviours, including absenteeism, procrastination, or disengagement from learning
- Emotional withdrawal, marked by reduced communication, irritability, or social isolation
- Risk-taking tendencies, particularly among students with limited adult supervision or peer-driven influences
- Decline in self-regulation, including difficulty managing impulses, emotions, and study routines

These behaviours should be understood as stress responses rather than disciplinary failures. Without appropriate psychological support, such patterns may intensify as examination dates approach.

### **VII.c Influence of Social Environment and Accessibility**

The post-COVID period has altered adolescents' social environments in ways that may compound academic stress. Increased unsupervised time, wider peer networks through digital platforms, and greater exposure to adult-like social behaviours can shape students' coping choices. In some contexts, the easy availability of substances or exposure to risky behaviours may intersect with academic stress, curiosity, and peer influence, increasing vulnerability among certain students.

From a psychological standpoint, adolescents under high stress may demonstrate reduced risk perception and impaired decision-making, particularly when emotional distress overrides long-term consequences. It is essential to approach this issue cautiously and ethically, emphasizing vulnerability rather than prevalence or causation.

### **VII.d Protective and Risk-Modifying Factors**

Not all students exposed to examination stress develop maladaptive behaviours. Psychological research highlights several protective factors that can buffer stress effects, including:

- Supportive teacher–student relationships
- Parental emotional availability and realistic expectations
- Peer support and positive social connectedness
- Access to counselling or guidance services
- Opportunities for autonomy and self-expression

Conversely, the absence of these supports—combined with rigid, result-centric academic environments—may amplify vulnerability and hinder recovery from stress-related difficulties.

### **VII.e Summary**

Emerging risk behaviours among secondary school students should be viewed through a psychological lens that recognizes examination stress as a contributing vulnerability rather than a sole cause. In the post-COVID context, weakened coping resilience, increased digital exposure, and altered social dynamics may intensify the impact of high-stakes examinations on vulnerable adolescents. Addressing these risks requires early identification, supportive interventions, and examination practices that prioritize psychological well-being alongside academic performance.

## **VIII Comparative Psychological Patterns across Telangana SSC, CBSE, and ICSE Boards**

Although Class 10 examinations across Telangana SSC, CBSE, and ICSE serve the same broad function of certification and transition, the psychological experience of students differs due to variations in curriculum intensity, assessment practices, accountability cultures, and the social environment surrounding board examinations. This section presents a comparative analysis of board-specific stress patterns and behavioural responses, particularly in the post-COVID context.

### **VIII.a Telangana SSC: Outcome Dominance and Fear-Based Performance Pressure**

The Telangana SSC system commonly reflects an outcome-dominant accountability model in which pass percentage and district performance are emphasized as key indicators of success. School-level practices are often shaped by administrative planning, frequent testing, special coaching sessions, and continuous monitoring to improve results. In such contexts, students are likely to experience:

- High performance anxiety linked to single-exam outcomes
- Fear of failure and fear-based compliance, especially among academically weak students
- Reduced autonomy, as learning becomes heavily guided and monitored
- Short-term, exam-oriented preparation, leading to cognitive fatigue and emotional exhaustion

In the post-COVID phase, these effects may intensify because learning gaps and reduced coping resilience increase students' sensitivity to continuous evaluation. While remedial structures may support academic progress, the psychological cost becomes significant when improvement is framed primarily as achieving targets rather than strengthening learners.

### VIII.b CBSE: Standardization, Competition, and Social Comparison Anxiety

CBSE's national-level curriculum and assessment framework provides a relatively standardized examination environment. However, CBSE students often operate in competitive academic ecosystems shaped by coaching culture, peer benchmarking, and parental expectations. Psychological stress in CBSE contexts frequently manifests through:

- Comparison anxiety, driven by peer performance visibility
- Competitive stress, particularly in schools with strong academic reputations
- Coaching dependence and time pressure, reducing leisure and recovery time
- Perceived need for "high scores", not only pass status, affecting self-worth

Post-COVID digital immersion further amplifies competitive comparison, as students' exposure to peers' achievements, rank discussions, and online academic content increases. Even when assessment policies aim to support broader learning outcomes, the competitive social environment may convert board preparation into a high-pressure performance race.

### VIII.c ICSE: Curriculum Load, Perfectionism, and Cognitive Overload

ICSE is often perceived as academically demanding due to its detailed curriculum structure, emphasis on language proficiency, and the need for sustained academic consistency. While many ICSE students benefit from strong conceptual grounding, the psychological stress profile in ICSE contexts often includes:

- Cognitive overload due to extensive syllabus demands
- Perfectionistic achievement orientation, where mistakes are experienced as personal failures
- Burnout vulnerability, especially when high workload is combined with high expectations
- Chronic academic fatigue, which may reduce emotional flexibility and motivation

Post-COVID disruptions may affect ICSE students through difficulties in re-establishing consistent study routines and sustaining high-level performance over a prolonged syllabus, making them more vulnerable to anxiety and emotional exhaustion during exam preparation.

### VIII.d Cross-Board Comparison: Key Psychological Differences

Across the three boards, differences can be summarized as follows:

Table 2: Board-wise comparison of dominant examination stress patterns among Class 10 students

Board System	Dominant Stress Driver	Psychological Pattern
Telangana SSC	Pass percentage & single-exam outcome	Performance anxiety, fear-based motivation
CBSE	Competition & peer comparison	Social comparison anxiety
ICSE	Curriculum intensity & workload	Cognitive overload, burnout

### VIII.e Summary

The comparative analysis suggests that board examinations are not psychologically uniform experiences. Telangana SSC, CBSE, and ICSE systems generate distinct stress environments through different accountability models, curriculum demands, and socio-academic expectations. In the post-COVID

context, the same high-stakes examination milestone interacts with weakened coping resilience and increased digital exposure, shaping board-specific patterns of anxiety, burnout, and behavioural responses. These findings strengthen the argument that examination reforms and preparation strategies should be tailored not only to academic standards but also to the psychological realities of adolescents within each board system.

## **IX Discussion – Rethinking "100% Results" and Success Metrics in Secondary Education**

The comparative analysis of Telangana SSC, CBSE, and ICSE examination systems highlights a central tension within secondary education in India: the prioritization of quantifiable academic outcomes over students' psychological well-being. While high pass percentages and improved rankings are often interpreted as indicators of educational effectiveness, the findings of this conceptual analysis suggest that such metrics may inadequately capture the broader developmental needs of adolescents, particularly in the post-COVID context.

### **IX.a Limitations of Result-Centric Success Indicators**

Pass percentage, distinction rates, and district rankings provide convenient numerical representations of academic performance. However, these indicators offer limited insight into students' emotional health, motivation, and long-term learning engagement. When institutional success is defined narrowly by examination outcomes, educational practices may shift toward short-term performance optimization rather than holistic development. This approach risks normalizing stress, anxiety, and burnout as acceptable by-products of academic achievement.

Across board systems, the pressure to achieve high results is transmitted through layered accountability structures that often leave little space for psychological reflection. For students, particularly adolescents navigating identity formation, such environments can reinforce the belief that self-worth is contingent upon examination performance. This belief may persist beyond school, shaping attitudes toward learning, failure, and self-efficacy.

### **IX.b Psychological Costs in the Post-COVID Context**

The post-pandemic return to high-stakes examinations has occurred without proportional adjustment to students' altered psychological states. Many students re-enter examination cycles with learning gaps, disrupted routines, and reduced emotional resilience. In this context, aggressive academic targets and intensified monitoring may exacerbate anxiety and disengagement rather than promote recovery and growth.

Digital immersion further complicates this landscape. Social media comparison, fragmented attention, and sleep disruption intersect with exam pressure, amplifying psychological strain. When academic success is framed exclusively in terms of results, students may lack safe spaces to express distress or seek help, increasing vulnerability to maladaptive coping behaviours.

### **IX.c Reframing Accountability with Psychological Awareness**

The findings suggest the need to shift from a results-only accountability model to a psychologically informed accountability framework. Such a framework would continue to uphold academic standards while recognizing students' emotional capacities, developmental needs, and contextual challenges. Balanced accountability would emphasize learning progress, emotional regulation, and resilience alongside examination performance.

Importantly, rethinking success metrics does not imply lowering academic expectations. Rather, it involves redefining educational success to include students' ability to cope with challenges, maintain mental well-being, and engage meaningfully with learning. When psychological health is integrated into assessment and monitoring practices, academic achievement becomes more sustainable and developmentally appropriate.

## **IX.d Implications for Policy and Practice**

From a policy perspective, examination systems must consider the unintended psychological consequences of rigid performance targets. Schools and education authorities may benefit from incorporating mental health indicators, counselling support, and stress-sensitive preparation strategies into examination planning. Teachers, positioned at the intersection of policy and practice, require professional support to balance performance expectations with empathetic pedagogy.

Parents also play a critical role in shaping students' interpretations of success and failure. Clear communication about realistic expectations and emotional support can mitigate pressure and foster healthier achievement orientations.

## **IX.e Summary**

The emphasis on achieving "100% results" reflects a well-intentioned desire for academic excellence but may inadvertently undermine students' psychological well-being when applied without contextual sensitivity. In the post-COVID educational environment, where adolescents face increased emotional and cognitive challenges, success metrics must evolve beyond numerical outcomes. A balanced, psychologically informed approach to secondary education offers the potential to enhance both academic achievement and student well-being, ensuring that performance standards support rather than compromise long-term educational success.

# **X Recommendations and Conclusion**

## **X.a Recommendations**

Based on the comparative analysis of examination systems and their psychological implications, the following recommendations are proposed to promote a more balanced and student-centred approach to secondary education in India:

### **X.a.1 Policy-Level Recommendations**

Education authorities should integrate psychological well-being indicators into examination planning and evaluation processes. While academic standards and accountability are necessary, performance targets should be complemented with mechanisms that assess learning continuity, emotional resilience, and student engagement. Periodic review of examination policies in light of post-COVID behavioural changes is essential to ensure developmental appropriateness.

### **X.a.2 School-Level Recommendations**

Schools should institutionalize counselling and guidance support as a core component of Class 10 preparation rather than as a remedial measure for crisis situations. Structured stress-management sessions, emotional literacy programmes, and realistic academic planning can help students develop healthier coping strategies. Examination preparation should balance instructional intensity with adequate rest, reflection, and peer interaction.

### **X.a.3 Teacher-Level Recommendations**

Teachers require professional development that enhances awareness of adolescent psychology and stress-sensitive pedagogy. When educators are equipped to recognize early signs of anxiety, burnout, or disengagement, academic interventions can be adjusted to support learning without amplifying fear or pressure. Shifting from purely test-oriented instruction toward concept-based and mastery-focused learning may reduce psychological strain while maintaining academic rigor.

### **X.a.4 Parent-Level Recommendations**

Parents play a crucial role in shaping students' interpretations of success and failure. Clear communication, emotional availability, and realistic expectations can buffer the impact of examination stress. Awareness initiatives can help parents distinguish between healthy academic encouragement and pressure that undermines emotional well-being.

### **X.a.5 Assessment-Level Recommendations**

Examination systems may benefit from adopting diversified assessment models that reduce overdependence on single-exam outcomes. Incorporating formative assessments, reflective learning components, and flexible evaluation strategies can help align academic accountability with psychological sustainability.

## **X.b Conclusion**

High-stakes secondary school examinations remain a defining feature of India's education system, influencing students' academic trajectories and psychological experiences. This paper examined the psychological implications of Class 10 examinations through a comparative analysis of the Telangana SSC, CBSE, and ICSE boards within the post-COVID educational context. The analysis demonstrated that while all three systems aim to ensure academic standards, their differing assessment structures and accountability cultures generate distinct patterns of stress, anxiety, and behavioural responses among adolescents.

The post-pandemic environment has intensified these challenges by altering students' learning habits, reducing coping resilience, and increasing digital exposure. In such conditions, an exclusive focus on numerical outcomes such as pass percentages risks overlooking the emotional costs borne by students. Reframing success in secondary education to include psychological well-being alongside academic performance is not a dilution of standards but a necessary evolution toward sustainable educational practice.

A psychologically informed approach to examination planning—one that balances accountability with empathy, rigor with flexibility, and performance with well-being—can better support adolescents during this critical developmental stage. Such an approach holds the potential to produce not only improved academic outcomes but also healthier, more resilient learners capable of navigating future educational and life challenges.

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