

# Addressing Whole Child Wellness in Schools

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Now more than ever, it is imperative that schools focus on serving and developing the emotional wellbeing of students. The pandemic has brought the issue of child stress and anxiety to the forefront, but focusing on student mental health should not be a reactionary trend to our current education challenges. Educating the whole child by offering an education environment that helps students stay balanced and thrive both academically and emotionally needs to become a mainstay of school culture and curriculum. This means developing school communities where children are individually known and supported through strong adult and peer relationships and ensuring students' days are filled with social emotional learning and activities that promote wellbeing.

## The Wellbeing Landscape

A [University of Calgary meta analysis published in JAMA Pediatrics](#) shows the pandemic has increased rates of anxiety and depression in school age children. One in four youth globally are experiencing clinically elevated depression symptoms and one in five are experiencing anxiety.

Adolescents are particularly at risk with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reporting that adolescent presentation to the emergency department and primary care clinics for behavioral and mental health problems and suicide attempts have [increased 31%](#) during the pandemic. In a recent American Psychological Association [survey](#) of more than 1,000 teenagers between 13 and 17 in the U.S., 43 percent said that their stress levels have increased over the past year.

At a time when childhood stress and anxiety is increasing due to pandemic disruption, it is tempting to imagine the urgency of mental health care in schools may subside. Unfortunately, the trend of eroding student mental health began well before COVID-19 became commonplace.

According to the [CDC](#), a meta analysis of research data shows school age children have experienced a steadily increasing rate of anxiety and depression since the turn of the century -- from 5.4% in 2003 to 8% in 2007 and to 8.4% in 2011–2012.

### **The Role of Schools**

While children’s wellbeing may have been relegated to the concern of family life in the past, the impact a student’s mental health has on academic and life success has helped society deem that schools play an essential role in cultivating well-being.

For example, the [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development](#) (OECD), whose mission is to “build better policies for better lives,” has compiled a [meta analysis of research](#) on the effects student wellbeing has on both school and life outcomes.

“Students with higher levels of wellbeing tend to have better self-esteem, more satisfaction with their schools and life, and healthier relationships with others. The [OECD’s 2015 Programme for International Student Assessment \(PISA\)](#) reveals a positive relationship between a sense of belonging at school, satisfaction with life, and academic performance. Emotionally healthy children have higher odds of growing into adults who are happy, confident, and enjoy healthy lifestyles.”

The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) has conducted its own studies on the effect of a child’s mental health on life outcomes and has specific recommendations for schools to implement to care for student well-being long term. Their 2022 report [Children’s mental health is in crisis](#) says: “While federal funding has provided schools with money to support students’ wellbeing, psychologists have been seeking additional long-term solutions to address the mental health problems.”

According to the report, there are three primary ways to support student mental health:

- Hiring more staff psychologists to meet the daily needs of students.
- Training teachers in psychological principles and trauma support.
- Passing and funding legislation which advocates for long term, proactive mental health services in school.

While hiring psychologists and formal teacher psychology training is invaluable, there are additional proven approaches to boosting student well-being. According to the [Learning Policy Institute](#), positive school climate, culture, and community is key in an approach that educates the whole child. In their research brief [Educating the Whole Child: Improving School Climate to Support Student Success](#) they share that “student learning and development depend on affirming relationships operating within a positive school climate... [which can] provide all children with a sense of safety and belonging by creating safe and culturally responsive classroom communities, connecting with families, teaching social-emotional skills, helping students learn to learn, and offering a multi-tiered system of supports.”

They point out several studies that reveal key factors that build positive school community and student wellbeing including:

- A personalized educational environment that allows children to be well-known and supported.
- Infusing social-emotional learning through the curriculum -- such as encouraging “perspective-taking and empathy in history and English language arts and on community and social problem solving in social studies, mathematics, and science.”
- A positive approach to schoolwide discipline that teaches students conflict resolution skills.
- A learning environment that supports intrinsic motivation by focusing on the mastery of goals rather than grades.
- Smaller learning communities that loop teachers -- an approach found to “improve student achievement, attachment, attendance, attitudes toward school, behavior, motivation, and graduation rates.”

Looping teachers is a recommendation not often followed in public school settings, but it is a hallmark of Waldorf education. The recommendation is [research based](#) as students who stay with the same teacher for over two years experience positive results both socially and academically. However, it might be argued that the more beneficial result comes from the well developed teacher and student relationship that forms by spending more time together in school life.

This [Frontiers in Psychology](#) meta analysis of research, titled [Fostering Students' Well-Being: The Mediating Role of Teacher Interpersonal Behavior and Student-Teacher Relationships](#) has found that “building resilient and caring interactions with educators enable learners to be more self-confident, protected, and knowledgeable in the educational environment.” It also leads to more positive peer interactions, higher educational performance, and markers of higher student wellbeing such as stress reduction and better classroom behavior.

## The Student Experience

This is undoubtedly why the [Centers for Disease Control](#) and the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#) also put forth teacher looping recommendations in their report [School Connectedness -- Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth](#). This report also looked at ways in which to empower students as a foundation of wellness. They speak specifically to assigning responsibilities in the classroom and engaging in volunteering and other service opportunities within school and within the larger community.

Volunteering in particular has been proven to contribute to overall well-being in persons of all ages. In the OECD study on wellbeing in society at large [How's Life?](#) they found: "Volunteering has been documented to foster cooperation and interpersonal trust, and regular volunteers are more likely to report higher levels of wellbeing. It provides individuals with new knowledge and skills, and those who volunteer feel more satisfied overall as a result of their participation."

Like volunteering, there are many other student experiences that promote wellbeing. Play and recess time are two vital components in a child's school day that not only promote overall wellbeing, but also have a proven positive effect on academic and social emotional outcomes.

According to a much-cited Stanford University study [School Recess Offers Benefits to Student Well-Being](#) recess is a profoundly important part of the school day that offers students opportunities to "learn and enhance communication skills, negotiation, cooperation, sharing, problem solving, perseverance, self-control, and conflict resolution."

The [American School Health Association](#) published the study [The Crucial Role of Recess in Schools](#) that cited research which came to a similar conclusion to Stanford researchers: "Recess serves a critical role in school... particularly unstructured recess and free play—provides a unique contribution to a child's creative, social, and emotional development. From the perspective of children's health and wellbeing, recess time should be considered a child's personal time and should not be withheld for academic or punitive reasons."

If children can have the privilege of playing outside at recess in a natural and green environment there are even more positive benefits. Access to green space during recess and play time, according to [this study published in the Journal of Pediatric Nursing](#), is associated with improved mental wellbeing, overall health, and cognitive development of children. A systemic literature review out of the UK [Nature activities and well-being in children and young people](#) looked at 14 individual research studies and confirmed that interaction with nature has a clear and profound impact on wellbeing in both childhood and adolescence with positive outcomes that included stress reduction and increased resilience, confidence, and self esteem.

If student wellbeing is truly to be prioritized in school systems, studies like these need to be considered seriously when proponents of increasing academic performance suggest sacrificing

recess and play in favor of increasing academic curriculum time. Studies on the importance of art curriculum must also be considered, especially as student wellbeing comes back into the forefront.

The [Education Commission of the States](#) compiled a 2020 report [Supporting Student Wellness Through the Arts](#) which cites multiple studies showing that: “Arts education and integration provides an outlet for students to process their emotions from disaster and trauma to begin the healing process and [build resiliency](#).” They continue saying, “The arts [including [music instruction](#)] offer [unique opportunities to support](#) SEL skills such as emotional regulation, personal aspirations and compassion for others.”

While our children are experiencing a decline in wellbeing brought about by the pandemic and other modern day stressors, schools have many proven strategies they can implement to put students on a path toward mental health and wellness. Schools which take this task seriously can invest in psychologists and psychological training for teachers; work to cultivate a strong and supportive community for students by looping teachers, encouraging parent involvement, and fostering intrinsic motivation; and mold curriculum to make space for recess, play, art, volunteering and social emotional learning.

Photo Credit: [Cedarwood Waldorf School](#)