

# Why Is Wellbeing Important in Schools?

There are many ways to answer this question: Why is wellbeing important in schools? We could focus on impacts of wellbeing on test scores or classroom management. We could illustrate the advantages relating to productivity, classroom communities, or teacher relationships. While we will touch on many of these benefits, the most important reason to care about wellbeing is that we, as leaders, have been trusted with the world's most valuable resource: children. Each student who frustrates us, confuses us, delights us, and impresses us has intrinsic worth and potential. It is a sobering and significant stewardship to be a part of the classroom/school community life that prepares children to "[inherit] resources of the race, and to use [their] own powers for social ends" (Dewey, 1897, p. 78). Thus we should focus first and foremost on wellbeing because we truly care about the students entrusted to us, recognize our moral obligation to nurture those within our stewardship, and want the best for them both now and in the future.

Traditionally schools have focused on students' current needs or short-term victories (e.g., mastery by the end of a unit or term, likelihood of graduation, etc.). However, these short-term items fall short in benefiting students compared with the life-long advantages of wellbeing. Ed Diener (2011) wrote,

[Happiness] is emotional capital we can spend in the pursuit of

other attractive outcomes. Research shows that happy people live longer, succumb to fewer illnesses, stay married longer, commit fewer crimes, produce more creative ideas, work harder and better on the job, make more money, and help others more. (p. 20)

Fostering and teaching wellbeing is a way to show students and educators we care about them and want to support them by enabling them with short- and long-term benefits. It means depositing knowledge and dispositions into an account that may someday fund their future marriage, health, profession, creativity, and success. Isn't that what we really want for each student?

But why does wellbeing need to be specifically prioritized in schools? Schools touch nearly everyone from faculty and students to parents and community leaders. Schools have the potential to share humanity's resources while enabling youth; including wellbeing in our students' educational experiences can naturally extend established purposes of schooling. Overall wellbeing enhances intrinsic motivation, decreases disciplinary problems, increases academic achievement, improves school satisfaction and leads to flourishing of individuals, communities, and nations (Buecker et al., 2018). Simply put, those who feel better can learn better. Research has found that "inducing positive emotions (such as joyfulness, love, or appreciation) enlarges cognitive perspectives and enhances the ability of individuals to attend to more information, make richer interpretations, and experience higher levels of creativity and productivity" (Cameron, 2012, p. 26). Our best learners and teachers are those who have the skills, resources, and environments necessary for them to experience wellbeing and reap the benefits of feeling good and learning more. Even more benefits are connected to individual aspects of wellbeing.

Facets of wellbeing, such as gratitude, hope, and emotional regulation, have been found to improve academic performance across

several areas. For example, students with high levels of hope can make adaptive attributions and overcome failure by making corrections. Thus failure ceases to be a long-term detriment to their self-worth. Similarly, gratitude increases students' satisfaction with school and propels them in making and pursuing intrinsic goals. Gratitude is positively correlated with "higher GPAs, greater absorption in meaningful activities, more life satisfaction, and more social integration." In addition, emotional regulation helps students get along with peers and teachers, exhibit prosocial behaviors, and adjust to new classrooms (Furlong, Gilman, & Huebner, 2014). Thus both generally and specifically, wellbeing gives our students a happy though competitive advantage both inside and outside the classroom.

Students are not the only ones who benefit from wellbeing on the agenda. Teachers who persist with low levels of personal wellbeing are more exhausted, more cynical, and more distant from their students. They question their own self-efficacy, limit their own achievements, are demotivated when faced with challenges, and are more likely to experience burn-out. In contrast, teachers who enjoy wellbeing are better able to interact, teach, and achieve (Bentea, 2017). In some cases, prioritizing wellbeing may only require a few changes to classrooms, procedures, and priorities, but these changes can lead to long-lasting positive impacts for both students and teachers.

Wellbeing does not spontaneously grow in the sidewalk cracks of time between class assignments and teacher meetings. If we are not deliberate about teaching and fostering wellbeing, students will grow up without knowing wellbeing is within their internal locus of control. Shawn Achor (2010) observed,

What was going on here [at Harvard] was that like so many people in contemporary society, along the way to gaining their superb educations, and their shiny opportunities, they had

absorbed the wrong lessons. They had mastered formulas in calculus and chemistry. They had read great books and learned world history and become fluent in foreign languages. But they had never formally been taught how to maximize their brains' potential or how to find meaning and happiness. (p.14).

We have the opportunity to formally teach our students to maximize their potential, and prioritizing their wellbeing is a good place to start. Your first step in enabling your students and educators with the power of wellbeing is to assess it. Then respond to the assessment in ways informed by research and adapted to your context. The resources that follow will help you start or continue your efforts to optimize your school's potential as a place of learning and flourishing.

## **Section Summary**

- Prioritizing wellbeing is one way to nurture the whole child.
- Wellbeing provides life-long advantages in health, work, relationships, and creativity.
- The far-reaching influence of schools can be more easily adapted to foster wellbeing throughout the entire community.
- Wellbeing improves students' academic performance, behavior, social integration, and satisfaction.
- Wellbeing improves teachers' ability to interact with students, teach concepts, face challenges, and avoid burnout.

## **Suggestions for Further Research**

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ASSESSING  
**WELLBEING**  
IN SCHOOLS

*An Educator's Practical Guide to  
Measuring Wellbeing*

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Bates, M. & Boren, D. M. (2019). *Assessing Wellbeing in Schools*. Equity Press. <https://equitypress.org/wellbeing>