

# Promoting Social and Emotional Well-being Through a Whole School Approach



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## Introduction

Over the past couple of decades, many experts and professionals in the education field have been gaining an understanding of the importance of a child's emotional health and well-being. Rather than being an afterthought in a child's development and education, the significance of social and emotional wellness it's becoming abundantly clear, particularly since evidence has shown that childrens' mental health directly influences their physical health, overall development, and even academic success.

As a result, it's integral that schools prioritize social and emotional wellness not only for the benefit of their students but also so that schools can more successfully work toward their own purposes and goals. Today's educational professionals need to have strategies in place in their school to promote an atmosphere for positive mental health and wellness. One such way to do so is to implement a "whole school" approach to wellness.

In this course, we'll discuss the philosophies underlying this aim, the studies that have shown its benefits, and some of the key actions that educators can take to make this happen.

## Section 1: Whole School Social and Emotional Wellness: What Is It?

As we begin to work toward a comprehensive framework (including all parties involved —mental health professionals, teachers, school administrations, students, and their families) that is meant to increase a school community's wellness, it's first helpful to clarify our goals. What is social and emotional wellness? What do we mean by a "whole-school approach"?

In this section, we'll provide some helpful overviews and components, including a ten-component community model that should work as an ideal endpoint for school wellness initiatives.

### What is a whole-school approach to wellness?

A basic definition of a whole-school approach to wellness is simple: It's one in which every member of the school community is working toward better social, emotional, and other (e.g., academic) outcomes for all (CDC, 2021). It's more complex than it sounds,

however, as a true whole-school approach requires a commitment from every member of the academic community. It also requires partnerships between these members, e.g., strong teacher-parent relationships, or school administration-community relationships (CDC, 2021).

It may, perhaps, be easier to think about a whole-school approach as a whole-child approach in order to first wrap our minds around the ultimate goal of such a concept. At its heart, the whole school approach exists to serve the whole child (CDC, 2021).

The CDC has established a Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child model as an overarching framework for addressing wellness and health in school communities. The emphasis of this model is on the role of the entire community as support for a child's holistic health. Since this model may represent a good starting point for conversation, we'll begin by defining it here before moving on to research supporting the whole-school approach and some practical strategies for its implementation (CDC, 2021).

## What are the components of the CDC whole school framework?

The CDC's components that whole school communities should work toward in order to optimize social and emotional wellness for all include (CDC, 2021):

1. **Health education.** In order for students to be healthy, we can't just assume that they come to school with a basic knowledge of health goals or an established metric for what constitutes health. We also can not make any assumptions that they know how to get there! Part of embracing a whole-school framework involves equipping students with the information and skills they need to make important health decisions for themselves. Health education needs to encompass an extensive curriculum that students can learn in a detailed manner, not a supplemental lesson that simply discusses a few nutrition or exercise goals and leaves it at that. Rather, we need to conceptualize this education as a full system of health literacy (or a more comprehensive, holistic way to think about health). We need to discuss health-promoting decisions with our students and give them the resources they need to incorporate health-enhancing behaviors into their daily routine. A holistic curriculum that focuses on these concepts could include a pre-K through grade 12 series of courses that address everything from physical activity and injury prevention to sexual health, violence prevention, healthy eating, and emotional wellness. In addition, the school administrators should run routine assessments of the health and wellness needs of their specific

student base and ensure that the health messages that their courses (and related materials, such as hallway posters) promote are specifically relevant for their students.

2. **Nutrition environment and associated services.** Think about it: A school campus and cafeteria constitute the consistent location of a significant amount of meals for most students throughout their childhoods. As such, the environment in which students receive these meals can afford a significant opportunity to provide students with information about healthy eating practices. It can also serve as a natural center for tangible resources (such as finances and food) aiding children as they make healthy choices. One goal of a whole-school approach to wellness should involve due consideration surrounding the quality of meals and snacks available in school cafeterias, as well as their presentation, their accessibility, and the messaging surrounding certain dietary and meal choices at schools. This methodology extends beyond the cafeteria: Schools should also be mindful of the nutrition standards presented at all school events. For example, it could be confusing to the students if their cafeteria environment is optimized to show the benefit of healthy food choices, but all vending machines throughout the school offer less healthy choices; or if the school consistently offers “fun” food at school events such as fundraisers; or if teachers consistently offer “fun” food as a reward in the classroom. On a federal level, there are nutrition standards that must be met for offered lunch and breakfast programs, but schools themselves need to ensure that their messaging is consistent, their nutrition professionals receive ongoing professional development, and the entire academic community (e.g., the whole school) models dedicated participation in the school meal program and other healthy behaviors such as drinking water. Why is this such an important part of the framework? We’ll discuss this below, but healthy eating has been shown in many studies to be directly linked to student wellness and increased academic outcomes.
3. **Employee wellness and an optimized physical environment.** While the central focus of a whole-school approach to wellness is the student, it’s important to remember that school professionals will be better equipped to help students become healthier if they’re healthy and happy themselves. Moreover, students learn as much by seeing other people’s behaviors (if not more) than they learn by simple instruction. If students are able to see that their teachers and other school officials are practicing healthy behaviors, students are much more likely to do so as well. Since this is the case, a whole-school approach to wellness will

necessarily include provisions and resources to help school employees (including instructors and those in administration) have better health outcomes. This includes environments that are conducive to healthy eating, enough time off work, adequate support to help employees do their jobs well, and other similar initiatives. Administrators and their employees also need to make sure that the school environment is physically safe, e.g., free of mold, asbestos, and active dangers. Schools need to provide information to both students and teachers regarding risk factors that may be more endemic to their populations (e.g., sedentary lifestyles) and provide opportunities and information to help people combat these risks (e.g., more opportunities for physical activity) as well as the results of these risks (e.g., depression and diabetes). Importantly, one basic way to ensure that employees are healthy is to give them adequate time off work and the highest-quality health plans that the school is reasonably able to afford.

4. **Helpful and accessible health services.** If at all possible, your school needs to have a health resource department on campus that is fully accessible to every person at the school. This department and its professionals need to be equipped to assist with the full range of potential concerns that both students and employees may exhibit, from physical maladies to emotional issues. A school's suite of health services should be able to go further than simply providing first aid: It should be able to help children and adults alike plan to manage chronic conditions with a high recurrence (e.g., diabetes, depression, and asthma). The health services department should also have a mental health professional on staff to help students and instructors manage the high-stress load that often accompanies an active academic environment.
5. **Counseling and social services.** On a similar note, a school should be able to thoroughly administer and interpret ongoing psychoeducational, psychosocial, and psychological assessments (overseen by qualified professionals) on a regular basis. From those assessments, schools need to provide targeted interventions as necessary as well as comprehensive support services. School safety and crisis response counselors should be freely accessible to all members of the academic community, and social workers should also be on staff to help identify any concerning situations and respond effectively through their positive resolution.
6. **Strategic, symbiotic involvement in the school's community.** A whole-school, whole-child approach to learning needs to be mirrored in a whole-community approach, as well, so that children feel that they exist within an environment that

supports their academic and emotional needs even when they're not specifically on their school's campus. Schools can do this by partnering with local businesses and volunteer organizations to support student learning and health-related activities in their neighborhoods. This should be a win-win situation for all involved because organizations and businesses will get exposure to the young people in their community and the students will experience a more holistic learning environment.

7. **Engagement with every students' family.** A whole-school, whole-child, whole-community approach to education and wellness would not be complete without emphasis on the family partnership as well. School staff needs to make sure that families feel welcomed; instructors need to provide recurrent, easily-accessible information to families; and school administrations need to establish modes of communication as well as frequent activities in which families can be involved. As we'll discuss in a moment, studies have shown that students do far better when their families are engaged in the school environment. This doesn't have to require an extensive amount of time on the part of the parents, but it's key that they are at least apprised of their student's progress, given opportunities to work closely with instructors to ensure student success, and provided with suggestions to enhance learning at home. In the event that your school is based on a remote model of learning, this type of family engagement is absolutely essential.

This framework should exist as an imperative goal for schools to work toward as they implement a whole-school approach to support every student's complete picture of wellness.

## **What are key principles to enhancing health and well-being in schools?**

Recently, the World Health Organization (WHO) completed a study to determine what a school that effectively promoted student, employee, and family health looked like. In concert with the CDC's recommendations, this information can start to paint a more complete picture of what a school should really be working toward (Pulimeno et al, 2020).

WHO worked with researchers across the globe and ultimately released a 2020 study in the journal *Health Promotion Perspectives* to discuss their findings. Ultimately, WHO was able to identify several key points of health-promoting schools. Additionally,



through their research, WHO created a concise definition of such a health-promoting school:

*A health-promoting school is one that constantly strengthens its capacity as a healthy setting for living, learning, and working (Pulimeno et al, 2020).*

In addition to this definition, WHO created a rubric of the types of activities and recurring actions that health-promoting schools will undertake. These include (Pulimeno et al, 2020):

- Fostering health and learning equally and with every measure and resource at their disposal
- Engaging with healthcare professionals as well as every other member of the academic community to do so (e.g., relying on experts instead of making their own decisions regarding healthcare)
- Investing in the nuts and bolts of a healthy environment, from high-quality nutrition and food safety programs to accessible programs for recreation, physical education, mental health counseling, and social support
- Implementing practices and policies that truly respect both students and their wellbeing, in addition to giving students every resource that they may need in order to achieve their version of success
- Investing in the health of families, school administration, instructors, and community members, based on the idea that it takes a village to fully educate a child; and that students who grow up in a healthy community are much more likely to themselves be healthy

Finally, WHO has developed a series of first principles or focus points that students who attend a health-promoting school should come away with. These include (Pulimeno et al, 2020):

- Students learn that caring for themselves and for other people are important and necessary goals.
- Students learn the importance of healthy decisions and being in control of their lives.
- Students learn which conditions they have control over that are the most conducive to health outcomes.

- Students understand the relationship between their actions and some of the leading causes of disease and disability.
- Students feel that they have the capacity to take on health-favoring endeavors in their daily lives

These last goals may lead to another question: Why do these principles matter? Why are we talking about students and their comprehension and capacity in regard to their health?

Their physical health and emotional wellness and resilience are inextricably linked. We'll touch on this subject next.

## **Why is it important to support students in maintaining resiliency and emotional wellness?**

It could be completely justified to wonder why we need to invest so heavily in the comprehensive health of our students—concentrating not only on their academic prowess but their mental and physical health as well. Not only do we need to make sure that our students are succeeding in their classes, but we're expected to ensure that they're able to regulate their emotions as well. As teachers, we're expected to monitor their social wellbeing and provide channels for community outreach (Spark, 2021).

Putting aside for the moment the question of whether teachers are already doing enough, and assuming that initiatives investing in student wellness would provide increased support for the higher workload expected of teachers, there are several reasons that the importance for schools to invest in holistic student wellbeing becomes clear. It also makes sense to ensure that the entire school community and the school itself reinforces those investments, instead of (for example) simply teaching students the importance of wellness without providing support, or offering nutritional advice with no increased opportunities for students to follow up on those recommendations (Spark, 2021).

In a nutshell, student wellbeing—including emotional wellness and resiliency—is heavily tied to satisfaction with life, general health, and academic wellness. It, therefore, makes sense for schools to be places where students can count on excellent instruction, consistent learning opportunities, and support for their whole-person wellness (Spark, 2021).

This is all well and good, but in order to understand how to truly support our students in this holistic way, we need to understand how a whole school environment and community can meaningfully and realistically contribute to a student's wellbeing. For example, the following descriptions of a school environment may represent some aspects that could make a student feel and be well (Spark, 2021):

- A school that supports students who participate in meaningful, significant activities (perhaps instead of pushing participation in specific activities for any reason, or not allowing students the time to pursue their interests outside of prescribed academics)
- A school that helps students understand their emotions and strengthen their control over those emotions, instead of rewarding those who ignore or push down their emotions
- A school that pushes each child to achieve success while giving all students the unique support they need in order to do so (while also being able to hear and respect those students when they need a break)
- A school that celebrates students when they feel like they belong to the academic community, while also allowing all students to show that sense of belonging in their own way

There are various types of student well-being that your school will need to respect and promote in order to truly support whole student wellness. These types of wellbeing include:

## **Mental Wellbeing**

We'll start by defining a student's mental wellbeing, as this is the sphere of wellness that should be most obviously linked to the traditional function of a school. When students enjoy fully-exercised and healthy mental wellbeing, they (Spark, 2021):

- Will likely be better able to recognize their own skills and potential
- Can meet challenges with a certain level of resiliency
- Are able to solve problems with creativity
- Can certainly be productive under the right conditions
- Feel that they are able to contribute to their community

A school might employ a whole-school approach to mental wellness by taking time to educate students on a regular basis about the common signs and symptoms that accompany common mental health issues. Moreover, these schools can invest in their campus to ensure that the buildings and grounds their students walk through are comfortable and safe. (As we know, Maslow's hierarchy of needs dictates that students must feel safe prior to being ready to learn, in any case). Finally, by both example and by direct education, a school can help students learn how to conduct themselves in a safe, nonjudgmental manner, and to take steps to reduce the dangers of bullying. Additionally, a school wholly oriented toward student wellness might concentrate on teaching students how to support each other, instead of tearing each other down (Spark, 2021).

## **Emotional Wellbeing**

When students are emotionally well, they are able to have (at least to some extent) a working knowledge of themselves. They find themselves equipped to take on the daily problems and stressors they face without being completely overwhelmed. Emotional resilience is an extremely important goal to work toward for every student, and schools prioritizing a whole-school approach can invest in their students' emotional development and provide awareness training to help equip students for the obstacles in their paths (Spark, 2021).

Students who develop higher emotional resilience and wellness tend to have fewer counts of disciplinary infractions. They have more time and availability to concentrate on their academics, which may be one of the reasons that increased academic outcomes are correlated with overall student wellness. An additional outcome is extended student health, as emotionally healthy students may have a higher ability to make appropriate and meaningful decisions for their physical health (Spark, 2021).

## **Physical Wellbeing**

A school that utilizes a whole-school approach to wellness cannot ignore a student's physical wellbeing. A student needs to feel both physically protected (e.g., safe) as well as able and supported to make healthy decisions (e.g., dietary and exercise-oriented) while they are at school. As a general rule of thumb, schools need to invest in and allow students to take regular exercise breaks, invest in a healthy diet, enjoy physical security, and practice any preventative healthcare measures that their personal physicians or the school medical team deems beneficial for their health. Your school may be able to help students invest in their physical wellbeing by giving them breaks throughout the day to

go on brief walks. In addition, investing in the nutritional content of cafeteria meals as well as the financial and other support necessary to ensure that all students enjoy equitable access to the cafeteria food is critical (Spark, 2021).

What is the link between education, health, and wellbeing? People need a certain level of energy and alertness in order to learn effectively. This goes for adults as well as young students. People also require a certain amount of education regarding good health choices and outcomes in order to be happier and healthier (Spark, 2021).

There are those who say that education is more than just a means to improve our brains; it's a full-body wellness intervention. However, students do require the whole support of their school and community in order to make this happen (Spark, 2021).

## **Social Integration**

Schools represent the settings in which children learn basic academic skills such as reading and writing. To a much larger extent, it's key to remember that schools are also the places at which students learn how to be part of a community. Students learn to talk with people their age, reason their way through problems and conversations, argue, care for others, and more within the school context. When schools actively work to support students as they learn to interact more effectively with each other—a key part of social and emotional wellbeing—students are happier. There have even been recent studies that show when students are able to consistently enjoy pleasant interactions with those around them, they tend to perform and learn better (Spark, 2021).

## **Behavior**

Consider this: For students that have a difficult home life, for any reason, the fact that they're able to go to a school that considers their wellbeing to be a priority can be a game-changer for their life's trajectory. Not only will they have the heightened academic achievements associated with increased social-emotional wellbeing, but they'll also have access to professionals they can trust. They may be able to gain resources to help them move through any trauma or difficulties they may have experienced. These students may be able to enjoy a safer, happier childhood as a result of their school life—which may enable their life to have a dramatically different (and better) outcome than they might have otherwise experienced. For example, studies have shown that students who attend schools that support their emotional well-being will be better able to internalize and move on from difficult experiences (Spark, 2021).

## **Personal Satisfaction**

At school, students learn valuable personal skills such as confidence and self-assurance. The very fact that they practice taking on new information, manipulating it, internalizing it, and learning how to communicate related ideas and information successfully is a process that confers a great deal of satisfaction and self-worth for many students. Similarly, learning how to shoulder the increasing demands of school, juggle different tasks, and take on responsibility can show many students the extent of their strengths and levels of resiliency. Of course, there is a balance to be found here, as schools need to be wary of causing too much stress or burnout. The goal here is to provide adequate goals and enough growth to make students feel good about themselves and their progress (Spark, 2021).

## **Academic Performance**

It cannot be emphasized enough that students and schools that invest in social-emotional well-being tend to do better academically as well. Although this is evident, the mechanism for seeing this result is not always clear. Perhaps students who are emotionally well and confident feel more equipped to concentrate on their studies or do better overall in school environments. In order to realize heightened academic outcomes, schools need to remind students of their achievements and avoid concentrating on any perceived flaws. Students need to be equipped to work hard and must be given the support systems they need to do well. This will increase their ability to be resilient to stress and give them a sense of self-worth in addition to their academic successes (Spark, 2021).

Ultimately, if we had to nail down in the most succinct manner possible just why student wellbeing is so important, it's this: Schools have an incredibly wide-reaching impact on a community. Not only do they serve children during their most formative years, but they also employ hundreds of staff members, and they give back to their communities in many ways. Schools that incorporate wellbeing initiatives into their communities are better empowered to support students and their communities. As a result, entire communities will be happier and healthier. Some of the other important benefits, such as reduced disciplinary issues and increased academic performance, are almost secondary when the social impact to wide groups is considered (Spark, 2021).

## Section 1 Key Points and Summary

- A whole-school approach to wellness is one in which every member of the school community is working toward better outcomes for all. It requires commitment from every member of the academic community: Parents, students, educators, and community members.
- We need to move from the idea that mental, physical, and emotional wellness are different and discrete. Rather, they're all parts of health literacy—as are other facets of our health, from social integration to personal satisfaction.
- School employees will be better prepared to help their students be healthier if they're happy and healthy themselves.
- Schools can partner with student families, local volunteer organizations, and businesses to support student learning in their larger communities. Studies show that students do better with this level of integration.
- Education, health, and wellbeing are inextricably linked. Schools need to focus on a whole-child approach, as well, and work toward strengthening all of these factors for a child's optimal school experience.

Now that we've discussed what a whole-school, whole-child, and whole-community approach is, we'll talk about some of the research that links social and emotional wellness to a range of positive outcomes.

## Section 2: Research Supporting a Whole-School Approach to Social and Emotional Wellness

If we are going to be investing in our school's systems for supporting our students, it's very important that we have a good reason for doing so. Fortunately, there is a world of research backing up the whole-school, whole-child approaches that we discussed in the first section of this course. In this section, we'll summarize some of the recent findings in the research that support these methods.

We'll also cut to some of the more salient of the findings right now: According to many studies, the consensus appears to be that whole-school, whole-child programs that support not only top-tier academic outcomes but a student's ability to communicate well, negotiate through problems, and practice their empathy, emotions, and social skills

tend to result in better outcomes for students across the board (e.g., both in the academic sphere as well as in their general lives).

The takeaway? Focusing on holistic support for your students' overarching development will result in better targeted academic results, as opposed to simply providing academic support only.

More granular takeaways from the current research seem to be as follows:

## **Beneficial Child Outcomes are Interconnected**

The first finding in support of the whole-child approach underscores something that many have suspected for decades: Social, emotional, and academic development are inextricably interconnected. A consortium of scientists across a wide array of disciplines—including economics, medicine, brain science, and psychology—joined forces to determine why, precisely, social-emotional-academic learning competencies are connected. It seems to come down to neurology, and the idea that boosting brain activity in one isolated part of the brain is impossible; rather, it's a symbiotic effect where helping a student in one area helps the student as a whole. While this may not seem to be an overwhelmingly revolutionary finding, the researcher's combined findings allowed governmental educational bodies to switch their focus from the question of whether public schools should concentrate on improving the social and emotional development of their students to how they could more efficiently prioritize this growth (Education Northwest, 2018).

## **Better Social-Emotional Skills Result in Improved Academic Outcomes**

Now that some level of correlation had been established, it was time to see whether a causative effect could be proven. Fortunately, it could. Moreover, the causative link was unidirectional.

What does this mean? Researchers were able to show that increased investment into a student's social-emotional learning directly led to increased academic outcomes without a distinct upgrade in the investment toward academic outcomes as well. However, the same benefits were not seen in the reverse direction: Merely boosting investment in academic training, for example, did not have a similar symbiotic effect on a student's social-emotional development. To provide a succinct, if potentially overly-simplistic



translation: Happier, healthier students are better learners, but better learners are not necessarily happier or healthier (Education Northwest, 2018).

The research in this area concentrated on students who participated in social-emotional instruction in elementary and middle school programs. Researchers found both short- and long-term benefits in the involved students. Researchers also found that preschool and high school teachers tend to understand the benefits of social-emotional development, but few teachers in these groups have the support, time, or bandwidth to invest in social-emotional instruction. The researchers noted the benefits in the elementary and middle school children and issued a general recommendation that schools find a way to support preschool and high school teachers in their ability to provide social-emotional instruction. They theorized that even earlier support would likely lead to positive outcomes as well and that extending support through the later grades certainly couldn't hurt (Education Northwest, 2018).

The researchers acknowledged that this would not be simple. Making social-emotional-learning, or SEL instruction, a supported endeavor for all grade levels would require ongoing professional development, statewide policies, and a general upheaval of many current educational standards. The researchers also recommended that helping students instill in themselves appropriate behaviors and self-discipline, and investing in a safe and healthy school environment would likely contribute to SEL and academic outcomes (Education Northwest, 2018).

## **Case Study: The Implementation of SEL Instruction to Support Families, Teachers, and Parents**

The researchers examined one Californian school district that decided to invest in helping their schools become “full-service community schools.” This would in theory support integrated efforts and supports for the students in their schools and create an entire school climate that was fully conducive to holistic student support. The school invested in partnerships with businesses and organizations in their community, partially through the establishment of a dedicated community school manager at each school in their district. At the end of a three-year review period, the researchers found that extending the school beyond the borders of the campus into the community, as it were, boosted student safety and success-related outcomes (Education Northwest, 2018).

## **A Randomized Trial Delving Into the Causative Effects of Social-Emotional Learning on Academic Outcomes**

The gold standard of research trials is something called the randomized trial, one in which a large group of study participants—in this case, students—*randomly* receive an assignment into either a test group or a control group. The reason this is the gold standard is simple: When the bank of study participants is large enough, this system more or less results in demographically equal groups as test and control subjects, instead of allowing for any type of bias in subject selection (Education Northwest, 2018).

In one randomized trial, researchers were hoping to learn more about the effect of social-emotional instruction on urban, low-income youth. After obtaining a significant set of results from the study, the researchers found that thorough social-emotional instruction led to a beneficial result on absenteeism, as well as a smaller but still significant impact on how the students performed in their math classes. There was also a generally positive impact on reading skills for the involved students (Education Northwest, 2018).

## **A Meta-Analysis Confirmed The Causative Link Between SEL and Academic Outcomes**

Beyond randomized trials, meta-analyses are considered to be quite compelling, as the sheer amount of data available and considered can help researchers draw conclusions with a much higher amount of confidence. In one meta-analysis, researchers considered the results from over 200 studies delving into whole-school wellness. The number of students involved in these studies was well over 250,000, and the age range included a diverse range of kindergarten through twelfth grade students (Education Northwest, 2018).

Compared to students who did not benefit from a whole-school approach that included an emphasis on SEL instruction, the participants who had that benefit enjoyed an 11th-percentile-point-gain in academic achievement—certainly significant regardless of any other criteria (Education Northwest, 2018).

## **The Effects of Investing in Students' Social and Emotional Outcomes Over a Multi-Year Period**

Next, the researchers sought to confirm that supporting children with their emotional and social development had concrete benefits over a course of several years. The researchers examined one school district that had a specific multi-year holistic student development program. After reviewing the profiles of the children who had been in the program for multiple years, researchers noted that students had reduced aggression, more engagement in their studies, and increased social behaviors (Education Northwest, 2018).

Intriguingly for our whole-school hypotheses, the researchers noted that the bulk of the effects of the intervention were “moderated by the school environment.” While it was clearly important to invest in teacher instruction and other mainstays of whole-school improvement, investing in the school and community itself had a huge effect at the population level on student social competence, academic excellence, and even interpersonal skills (Education Northwest, 2018).

## **Whole-School Programs to Promote Good Outcomes for Elementary-School Children**

In this case, the researchers wanted to see the effects of different whole-school programs to help reduce problem behavior in school-age children and track their objectively measurable outcomes. The key difference in this study was to see whether the implementation of these initiatives for the entire school community, instead of a select few randomized students for study purposes, had a holistic effect on the entire school. The researchers found that, on the balance, all of the students tended to do better in measurable outcomes such as academic excellence when the implemented measures involved the entire campus instead of just a few students. In other words, when the entire culture was oriented around holistic wellness and healthiness instead of it being implied that health and excellence was by definition a fringe expectation, everyone seemed to benefit (Education Northwest, 2018).

## **Seeking out Benefits of Whole-School Academic Investment Beyond Academics**

The researchers here were ultimately interested in learning more about the specific benefits that adolescents experienced from a whole-school approach beyond concrete academic outcomes. After all, implementing a whole-school approach to wellness is expensive and requires a great deal of work. If the researchers were able to determine beyond doubt the specific benefits that a school community would experience from the implementation of these types of systems, that would make the investment seem far more intriguing, particularly from an administration's perspective (Education Northwest, 2018).

Fortunately, the researchers were able to determine that students who attended schools that implemented whole-school forms of wellness enjoyed heightened civic engagement, favorable mental health outcomes, and even safety. This is partially due to the fact that many adolescents spend the vast majority of their daylight hours in school, so the potential that schools have to positively affect their students is quite large. The researchers further noted that the benefits they were seeing depended on the implementation of several different types of whole-school activities, from formal instruction during class time hours to after-school programs of heightened quality, increased investment in campus safety, and the emphasis on a varied world of high-quality nutrition choices (Education Northwest, 2018).

## **What does the research say about how schools should go about investing in a high-quality social and emotional environment?**

At this point, it could be tempting to say that the evidence is clear: supporting the social and emotional well-being of our young students boosts most, if not all, other aspects of their development. Doing this also improves virtually every segment of a school's larger community. Here, we'll start to shift to talking about what we know in the context of what we can do to support high quality social and emotional development (Badger, 2020).

For a long time, teachers believed that enhancing social and emotional skills in their students was a project best taken on at the classroom level—one wherein each teacher got to have control over the individual strategies used. This strategy was seen as sensible for a long time for a few reasons: Perhaps only a few teachers were interested in social-

emotional learning and did not have administrative backing, so they had no choice but to implement strategies at the classroom level. In addition, the administration thought that social-emotional learning strategies should be created and administered by the people who know the students best (Badger, 2020).

More and more, it's becoming clear that we need to forego an individualized classroom approach in favor of a whole-school one. We're learning that we need to embed these wellness-centered practices into our students' daily routines. We need to help them cement these skills with activities that occur outside of the classroom. We need our students' parents and the community at large to help our students invest in their social and emotional wellbeing (Badger, 2020).

This is not a new concept. WHO recommended this type of approach (even terming it the 'whole school approach') as far back as 1998. However, even though we're decades out from that recommendation and although there has been a lot of money and time invested into this idea, we're still not a great deal closer to having this as a universally-enjoyed standard (Badger, 2020).

If we break this down logically, we might find that a whole-school approach can be distilled into the ongoing involvement and partnership of the teaching and learning component of a school system, its ethos and environment, and the external community of the school—the partnerships and families which the school can leverage to draw learning outside of merely the school campus (Badger, 2020).

One group of researchers decided to perform a meta-analysis to learn more about the efficacy of a whole-school approach based on some case studies of schools that have effectively implemented this type of system. After reading thousands of abstracts and hundreds of full articles, the researchers selected studies for their analysis that had a solid experimental design (such as a randomized trial), data that was well-reported and formatted for easy use and confident extrapolation, published recently, and met the whole-school-approach as defined by WHO. In addition, the researchers decided to look carefully at studies that appeared to be aimed at elucidating the relationship between a whole-school approach to social and emotional wellbeing and reduced "problem behaviors" (such as bullying or extreme social reticence) (Badger, 2020).

In all, the researchers identified 45 studies that encompassed a total of 500,000 students between the ages of 4 and 16. The researchers decided to look at four main outcomes associated with the implementation of a whole-school approach to wellbeing (Badger, 2020):

- School performance
- Social and emotional adjustment
- Behavioral adjustment
- Internalizing symptoms (which can be associated with reduced pathologies like anxiety and depression)

As the researchers completed their analysis, they made sure to correct for certain variables in order to learn as much from the data as possible—including the original intent of any interventions included in the studies, and demographic information provided regarding the participants in the studies, and how far the interventions actually went (e.g., for how long, or whether they involved the entire community or just the school employees and families (Badger, 2020).

The researchers saw the following results regarding the four outcomes they chose to examine (Badger, 2020):

- In schools that implemented a whole-school approach, the studies showed that there was a significant (if small) increase in the social and emotional adjustment of the involved students.
- Regarding behavioral adjustment: The students in the study exhibited a positive increase.
- School performance: The researchers actually saw no significant effect.
- Internalizing symptoms: The researchers saw a small but positive increase (Badger, 2020).

The researchers noticed a few more salient and highly relevant facts among the data and drew significant conclusions including:

- When a school included its entire surrounding community (e.g. parks, nearby businesses, even other close schools) in its whole-school social-emotional learning approach, the students involved saw a much higher positive impact on their social-emotional adjustment.
- While many other analyses and studies have shown that academic performance grows with social-emotional wellness, the researchers in this study found that there was no significant correlation.

- However, as there was a positive impact from the whole-school approach regarding the students' health and outcomes in other areas, the researchers felt comfortable saying that there was an overall clearly positive effect (Badger, 2020).

It's important to realize that this meta-analysis had strengths and limitations. For example, it's impossible to normalize the data for every single affecting variable. It's also entirely possible that the validation process that the authors went through to narrow down thousands of studies to 45 naturally left out studies that showed, for example, the impact of whole-school social-emotional wellness initiatives on academic performance (Badger, 2020).

The researchers then went on to discuss what the data showed about the effective implementation of whole-school approaches. After all, if there have been recommendations to establish a whole-school approach in this manner for almost three decades, why haven't more schools done it?

The researchers found a clear answer: It's not an easy process. In order for a whole-school approach to work, every member of a school (and a larger community) must be committed to both implementing and supporting the approach over a long-term period of time (Badger, 2020).

Fortunately, by comparing the length of time that different schools were able to sustain their whole-school wellness goals as well as the different implementation strategies that various schools implemented, the researchers were able to draw some conclusions about factors that led to a higher likelihood of success (Badger, 2020).

These included (Badger, 2020):

- Routine, ongoing assessment and evaluation of the way that schools were implementing their interventions
- Strong community, family, and school partnerships; not only did these increase the likelihood of enjoying academic performance benefits, but they also increased the longevity of the approach itself!
- Strong, routinely reconsidered and planned communication strategies

The schools that had exhibited these characteristics tended to employ the whole-school approach for longer and to see better results. The hardships of seeing benefits from these approaches also become clearer: It can be very difficult to sustain this type of rigorous investment and activity (Badger, 2020).

At the end of the meta-analysis, the researchers took some time to review the implications that their findings had for schools that wanted to invest in a whole-school approach to student social, behavioral, and emotional development. While the authors of this study were able to show the positive effects of a whole-school approach, they were also able to identify some of the major reasons why it often doesn't work (Badger, 2020).

In the next and final section of this course, we'll begin to discuss the various ways that schools, including both teachers and administrators, can work to both implement a whole-school approach and increase the efficacy of their aims (Badger, 2020).

## Section 2 Key Points and Summary

- Whole-school, whole-child programs support both academic outcomes and students' ability to communicate well, deal with problems effectively, and practice their empathy.
- Happier, healthier students are better learners, but better learners are not necessarily happier or healthier.
- Extending the school beyond the borders of the campus into the community boosts student safety and success-related outcomes.
- Social-emotional instruction can lead to reduced absenteeism and other good results (such as better performance in math classes).
- When a school includes its entire surrounding community (e.g., parks, nearby businesses, even other close schools) in its whole-school social-emotional learning approach, the students involved had a much higher positive impact on their social-emotional adjustment.
- In order for a whole-school approach to work, every member of a school (and a larger community) must be committed to both implementing and supporting the approach over a long-term period of time.
- Some factors that can lead to a higher likelihood of success for whole-school programs include routine assessments, good communication, and strong community-school-family partnerships.



In the final part of this course, we'll examine practical ways that teachers and schools can implement these approaches.

## **Section 3: Relationships, Self-Care, and Classroom Strategies: Implementing a Whole-School Approach**

A critical factor of whole-school wellbeing that was identified as vital in the success of these interventions is the concept of a strong community-teacher-family partnership.

### **What is the role of relationships between and among senior leadership, school staff, and students in creating a sense of belonging and enjoyment?**

One of the most important things a school can do in order to boost social-emotional wellness is invest in its relationships—particularly the connections between school employees (including both administration and teachers) and the young students (Stinger, 2019).

As one source pointed out: Teachers who make a point of standing outside of their classrooms and happily waving and greeting their students on the way into their rooms aren't only adding a bit of joy to their interactions, but they are also building good relationships with their students. Additionally, they may be doing their part to make their students healthier and happier years into the future (Stinger, 2019).

A recent study out of Pediatrics journal found that children who have strong relationships with their families and schools enjoyed protection from a range of negative health outcomes well into adulthood. The negative health outcomes that these children avoided ranged from poor mental health outcomes, being involved in violence with their peers, and even substance abuse (Stinger, 2019).

The takeaway? These connections, early on, can help bolster a student's social-emotional skills and increase their chances of enjoying health for years. The studies that show this data don't go into precisely why these connections could confer such stark health benefits, but they do show a strong correlation. Some researchers have even suggested that strong peer and educator relationships in school could even mitigate some risky behaviors (Stinger, 2019).

Importantly, the researchers noted that the work to help create and sustain these relationships did not have to require intense amounts of effort. Instead, it was much more effective for educators to prioritize small but recurrent habits to help students learn that they could rely on the adults around them for comfort, mentorship, and formation (Stinger, 2019).

Here are some ways that educators can work to form these needed connections with their students and families (Stinger, 2019):

1. **Educators can perform frequent check-ins on their school's climate and culture.** It's hard to form a relationship with something you don't know. One educational expert recommends that educators first begin with administering a survey to the students, parents, and teachers at the beginning of each year or semester, just to get a pulse on the climate and culture in their area (or classroom, or even building). This survey can probe such data as the preferred frequency of email communications, whether students feel safe with their activities, and the types of popular subjects that students would like to have featured in their materials (e.g., the popular books and films that may be able to be incorporated into, say, math problems). Through this type of survey, you may also be able to get a sense of the types of resources that people in your school both have and need, which may, in turn, equip you to be a more helpful educator. After you administer this survey and take time to analyze the results, you and your school can work together to connect people with needed resources and further make your classroom a place where students feel comfortable, happy, and taken care of.
2. **Make it very easy for families to contact you or the person who is most likely to answer their questions.** It may be pragmatic to say that a school-family-community relationship should begin with practicality, but this is likely what families will require initially from your school in order to keep the lines of communication open. Based on the results of any surveys you're able to administer as well as your experience as a teacher, brainstorm the most common questions that parents are likely to ask. Assign a point of contact (or several) and, in the communications with your parents, make very clear who those points of contact are and make it very clear how to get in touch with them. This information should be included in every communication, even unrelated ones. (Think about parents who suddenly have, say, a health question about their student: If they're able to go to the very last email from you and quickly find the

phone number or email of the school nurse, their experience will be much better).

3. **Incorporate evidence-based methods for building relationships between students and staff.** In the past, the CDC has funded programs that work to build needed relationships through one-on-one mentoring programs for students (e.g., that connect students who have a specific need, such as tutoring, with a school staff member who happens to have that expertise), service-learning opportunities, strategic classroom management strategies, and high-quality, safe, and fun clubs (with a school staff member as an overseer) on campus. These types of programs help students on your school campus associate adult staff members with helpful resources and enjoyable experiences.
4. **Sometimes the best way is the simplest: As one of your professional education offerings for your staff, offer educators helpful training on how to invest in their relationships with other staff members, and with students.** This may be even more effective if you extend this training from simply educators to administration, service staff, and even student family members. Having a set of common language and values, as well as a consistent level of care and safety for students, will help your students feel more comfortable and less anxious. (Insofar as this training is extended to families, it'll be key to make it very clear that it's voluntary.) Moreover, you'll need to make sure that this training is high-quality. Elements included in effective programs include units on how to express care and compassion, how to challenge students appropriately, how to support students when they are feeling anxious, how to share power and responsibility effectively, and how to expand possibilities for all studies.
5. **Go out of your way to meet your families where they are.** As you work to improve your relationship with families and community members, make sure that you're offering resources (including timed ones, such as meetings) when they are able to attend. This may include offering meetings before work or in the evenings or on weekends, ideally with refreshments included. If deemed appropriate in your school district, a home visiting program may also work: Traveling to your families' homes, introducing yourself, and learning about their children directly from them can really help invest in your relationship.

## **What are some specific ways that a school can employ a whole-student, whole-school approach to wellness (Earp, 2021)?**

1. First of all, it's important to narrow our focus as we begin to implement these measures. By its very nature, a whole-school approach will require rethinking learning strategies in many different aspects of the educational community. It can therefore be extremely overwhelming, which can lead to paralysis and inaction from the very beginning. It's in a school's best interest to establish its priorities, do the research, and decide from the very earliest days of implementation to spend most of its efforts on the interventions and updates that will have the most effect. This may depend upon the current status of your academic community. For example, in some schools, there may be a need to focus first on physical wellness. In others, the most pressing need might be mental health. This idea leads nicely into the next specific way a school can be effective in this area.
2. A school should establish a streamlined leadership team to make key decisions, drive implementation, and review the progress of these initiatives. Again, due to the nature of transforming a school with these wellness programs, planning meetings and even implementation itself can very quickly devolve into a too-many-cooks-in-the-kitchen scenario. It's a good idea to pull together a representative committee of interested individuals to serve as the central decision-making force. These individuals should represent a wide array of competencies and motives; for example, an effective committee would likely include at least one instructor, health professional, administrative member, and parent. This committee should be in charge of prioritizing community health decisions, initiating and delegating specific projects, and coming up with milestones at which to complete a review of the school's overall progress.
3. Although it's important that this committee serves as the ultimate authority for decision-making in order to drive effective progress, it's also key that the committee obtains buy-in from each member of the academic community. This is one reason that the committee should be representative of each member of the academic community.
4. Finally, this committee should prioritize finding ways to engage with and listen to students as the committee works to implement whole-health initiatives. Whether this means going so far as to invite a student to serve on the committee

itself or if this is just one of the higher-priority recurring actions the committee takes is a decision your school needs to make. However, it's key that the students feel heard. More than that, as the focus of the initiatives your school is engaging in, students can provide extremely valuable feedback regarding the efficacy of your aims.

## **What key actions educators can take to create a whole-school approach to promote emotional health and well-being?**

When researchers propose massive changes and paradigm shifts influencing how educators should be teaching their students, it can be difficult to conceptualize how a teacher can do much without large amounts of support and increased budgets. While it's true that your administration is going to have to get on board in order for you to be able to support your students with a whole school approach in the best way possible, there are actions that teachers should be able to take in order to provide support without huge levels of investment.

A concrete and practical list of actions that teachers can complete to influence this whole-school approach right now includes the following (Elias, 2019):

1. **Try to be a positive role model for your students in both actions and in words, specifically with regards to mental and physical wellness.** Very likely, this is already something on your to-do list, but take a moment to consider specifically what your students see you doing most often—and what your colleagues see you doing. When you're upset, use visible coping mechanisms to show students that they can self-calm effectively. When you have a decision to make, use a demonstrably strategic problem-solving process, and speak about it with your students. Whenever possible, exhibit clear empathetic concern for every other member of your school's community, and act, particularly while on campus, according to the values that you have verbally espoused. This may feel performative, but it's a very real way to influence what others do in a beneficial manner and help demonstrate good behaviors for your impressionable students.
2. **Model responding to potentially frustrating real-life situations in a rational and reasoned way.** For example, when students are being difficult and when other students are clearly aware of or impacted by the difficulty, show a measured reaction. Offer your students the chance to have a voice in your classroom, even when you're aware of what they will say, and prioritize listening to your students'

feedback in tough situations (such as when you are mediating an interpersonal situation in your classroom). When you're having a teachable moment with your students, calmly explain to them what the consequences of their choices are, and, whenever possible, allow your students to have second chances while under your oversight.

3. **Use literature to model emotional and social awareness to your students whenever possible.** No matter what you're teaching—history, science, literature—you should be able to use biographies or autobiographies to highlight the good choices that people have made throughout history (or discuss the less-than-savory ways people have bottled up their feelings and acted out in unhelpful ways). Help your students select positive role models from your subject, have them participate in role-play exercises to help them understand the work that has shaped our culture, and emphasize the types of real-world problems that people are trying to solve today.
4. **Have your students practice writing as a way to think about what they say and communicate effectively.** Communication is important, and offering children a way to think first and speak second can help them invest in their relationships and empathetic skills. You can do this by making sure that your students have access to a wide variety of emotion words, for example, and helping them understand that writing things like “this made me feel sad” is a powerful way to understand their own feelings. You can also help students realize that processing their decisions and choices in writing can make those decisions and choices easier to make! Some good activities for helping students use writing to benefit their lives and your community might include having your students write down their aspirations and goals and spend time verbally connecting those goals to the things they do every day or setting aside time in your students' days to allow them to journal.
5. **Initiate frequent conversations about what it means to have character.** In academic communities, it was the trend for years to stick to objective facts when discussing literature and historical events. Today, you can likely help your students get more excited about your subject matter and promote more healthy classroom discussions by using the material you're already going over (just presented with more depth and subjectivity). If appropriate in your school environment, you could initiate these conversations by sharing personal stories, listening to students' experiences, discussing examples of kindness that you see

in school stories and around campus, discussing both fictional and real-world dilemmas and the types of values that might influence their central conflicts, and discussing the different motivations that we might all have to act the ways that we do. Not only will this help you promote emotional well-being in your classroom, but it'll also help your students invest in their communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and ethical decision-making skills.

6. **Help your students see the importance of participation in school events and community activities, and give them the support they need to participate fully.** Your students should be part of your whole-school approach to wellness, and that starts with their participation in school and community events and activities! Make sure that you link opportunities for community participation into your classroom's daily activities, and you ensure (as much as possible) that your students have the bandwidth to become involved (e.g., not assigning them extensive amounts of homework in conjunction with school or community events). Take the time to notice and celebrate students who volunteer to help their peers, and encourage your students to take part in cultural events and share what they experienced with the class. The same goes for community service projects, special events, and exercise programs.
7. **Introduce mindfulness to your students.** You may have heard of mindfulness either as a stress-reducing tactic or as a component of a practice such as yoga. You can help your students experience the benefits of this practice without too much effort. For example, you could help your students have a short, quiet, mindful moment at the beginning and end of your class, which will ultimately help them have a more peaceful transition between the different parts of their day. This may help your students avoid stress and also have a more ready mind for studies. You can also give your students time to reflect on what was learned at the end of the day, or time to figure out what they liked most or least about their experiences. You can also get much more valuable feedback on how to support your students in this way. Finally, it can be a great idea to teach your students self-calming strategies. It'd be foolish to ignore the fact that school will be highly stressful for your students even in a best-case scenario. Accepting this and giving your students opportunities to self-soothe can forestall many unproductive and harmful ways that students might otherwise react to stress.
8. **Help your students feel better equipped to make good decisions about their relationships and their health.** Ultimately, the focus of a whole-school approach

to wellness is to help the student be healthier—but, as much as a whole-school healthy environment can help with this, students absolutely need to make the final choice themselves. You can empower them to do so by making this a consistent practice in your classroom. Have your students set frequent health goals, post them publicly in your classroom, and celebrate any forward motion toward those goals. You can also help your students set these goals for things they can do to improve their mental health and ways they treat each other—e.g., increasing their honesty, or working to help others more frequently. While these don't have to be publicly addressed, discussing them openly when appropriate can break down some of their stigmas.

## **As a teacher, how can I help my students learn to self-soothe?**

We've learned that one of the big parts of embracing a student-centric whole school approach requires giving students the real-life strategies they need to pursue mentally healthy actions. You'll find that you can significantly contribute to a whole-school atmosphere of calm comfort and confidence by helping your students find ways to work through the intense emotions and experiences that school-age children are often navigating.

Students who are able to self-soothe and self-regulate are more likely to have the ability to focus on their studies, make better health and happiness choices, and leave other students alone (e.g., avoid antagonistic or bullying behaviors). It may seem like this should be an innate, known behavior, but many students come to school without knowing how or when to calm themselves down, or how to effectively transition their minds between two different topics or activities (Natalie Lynn Kindergarten, 2021).

Here are four effective ways that you can help students navigate stress and practice the calm-down process within your classroom (Natalie Lynn Kindergarten, 2021):

1. Give your students extremely practical methods for identifying their feelings. School-aged students experience many complex emotions. If confusion and frustration happen to be layered on top of those emotions simply because a student doesn't know how to label, react to, or respond effectively to their emotions, the negative aspects of difficult emotions can be amplified. As a result, an overwhelmed student may get angry or emotional, lash out, or shut down completely. In other cases, an overwhelmed student may even have headaches or migraines in response to their anxiety. The first step in learning effective self-



regulation techniques is to help our students figure out, very simply, how to finish the sentence “I am feeling...” It may feel rudimentary to have to teach this, but it is very important. Methods for teaching this could include spending time at the beginning of each year talking about what happiness, sadness, jealousy, pride, and other emotions look and feel like. Younger students could use flashcards or stickers to review or indicate the feelings that they have experienced in a day. This type of activity can go a long way toward helping boost a student’s ability to empathize as well. If you’d like to go the extra mile or gear this type of activity back toward more traditional studies, read books for each emotion, or discuss how historical characters may have felt in the moment as they completed landmark actions.

2. Teach your students to harness deep breathing. This, again, may not sound like a particularly necessary activity, but studies have shown precisely how effective deep breathing can be. In many ways, breathing deeply can represent a very quick way to reset the brain-body connection and help instantly mitigate any difficult emotions a student may be experiencing. If you’re looking for a way to get students out of fight or flight mode in a very quick amount of time, tell them (or sit down and help them) move through several deep breaths. These breaths will help their brains realize that they are not in danger, which can release students from the fight or flight response and allow them to have a more measured reaction to any given situation. This type of exercise could be as simple as having your students take 3-10 deep breaths when they are experiencing any type of stress.
3. Equip your classroom with a calm down corner or a calm down kit. This type of dedicated space or equipment used for calming purposes can help students realize the importance of serenity and teach them a fun and special way (instead of punitive) to calm down. If you have the space, creating a small area in your classroom where a student can specifically go to calm themselves could be beneficial. (This space could also easily double as a reading nook.) In the calm-down corner, you could have a poster or flashcard deck to help students identify the emotions that they’re experiencing. For younger students, it can often be helpful to include a mirror in this corner, so they can see their faces and begin to connect some of the outward signs of distress to an identifiable emotion. This can also help a student learn more about empathy, which will help them as they mature. In the calm down corner, students should know that after they identify their emotions, they should breathe deeply. You might post an infographic, for

older children, about the different types of breathing exercises they could utilize. Finally, students should have access to a few different types of calm-down activities or behaviors they could complete after first identifying their emotions and then breathing. These strategies or activities could include using a fidget toy, counting to a certain number, reading a book, spending ten minutes with a coloring book, or throwing cotton balls into a cup. If you don't have the space in your classroom to specifically set up and dedicate to a calm-down corner, you could instead put together a few different calm-down kits in boxes around your classroom for students to use as they need.

4. Finally, teach your students how to problem-solve effectively. Often, our students experience troublesome emotions when they encounter problems in their daily lives. Teaching our students how to thoughtfully meet these problems and mediate creative solutions is a skill that they will use for their entire lives. Once your students have worked to calm themselves down (an important step in effective problem-solving), give them different ways that they can go about solving the problems that they face. This will help your students feel more in control, and likely more equipped to make a positive, reasoned choice instead of a hasty one. The strategies you select for helping students solve problems will likely depend on their age, at least to some extent. Common strategies might include helping your students consider sharing, moving away from a stressor, reaching out to a trusted adult, or asking other students how they feel instead of making harmful assumptions. If your students are younger, you may be able to provide a classroom stuffed animal to "hold" their anxieties or worries for a time while they figure out an effective way to deal with their problems.

## **How can educators foster whole-school social and emotional wellbeing through either a large-scale disruption in education or with a sudden shift to remote education?**

The past few years have shown the urgency of having strategies in place to support student and teacher wellness even though extremely unexpected and wide-scale disruptive events. Moreover, the simple concept of whole-school outcomes and initiatives can seem to be at odds with the very concept of remote education: If a student is at home, or if all students are at home, can they still reap the benefits of whole-school wellness efforts? What would those efforts look like?

Whether your school educates remotely now or you simply want to be prepared for any shifts that may occur in the future, it's a good idea to be prepared. Here are three distinct strategies you can use to help your students enjoy the benefits of whole-school wellness when they're not able to set foot on campus (Pitts, 2021):

1. **Create continuity.** If you're experiencing a shift from campus learning to distance learning, give your students the ability to enjoy just as much of the familiar structure they experience in your classroom as is possible. Researchers who examined the effects on general wellness that students experienced in the 2020-2021 shift to remote education that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic found that mimicking the daily schedule and learning environment most familiar to the students (e.g., their classroom culture and atmosphere) as much as possible eased the transition for students. This investment had a correspondingly positive effect on students' ability to self-manage and be socially aware. Perhaps the most important consideration is the ability to continue the core relationship-building that occurred in the classroom in the remote learning environment—including close relationships with friends, but also the mentorship relationship with educators and teachers' aides as well as the good social effects of being around classmates that students didn't really know that well. This also presents several challenges, of course, not the least of which is that students socialize differently through a screen than they might in person. Educators may therefore need to think outside the box to recreate peer and mentor relationships for those in distance learning. Virtual recess, pen-pal programs, and classroom rhythms such as virtual circle time and check-ins have all been shown to at least begin to meet students' needs in this arena. Investing in peer relationships has also shown to be effective, although this may be significantly more difficult in an age of remote education or even social distancing. Using virtual conference rooms strategically may be one effective strategy that allows students some level of socialization (and accompanying trust and support) without needing to be in person. If your students have several different teachers in your remote learning setup, you may be able to work with their other teachers to establish common conventions across your remote classrooms and enjoy enhanced overall effects for everyone involved.
2. **Invest in models of metacognition for your students.** First of all, it's necessary to accept the fact that you as an educator are going to experience the stress of your sudden shift to remote learning (or even just the long-term effects of remote learning) in completely different ways from your students. Why is this important?

A recent study that sought to explore the way that we engage with other people showed that we engage with our own thoughts more—and the way we do this may matter even more than our engagement with other people. Educating your students about this connection and teaching them practical methods for understanding and evaluating their own thoughts can be a valuable way for students to take advantage of the fact they may be spending more time at home without the company of others. This is, of course, no substitute for proper socialization, but it may help students realize other benefits instead. Offering your students frameworks for self-reflection and emphasizing the importance of doing so can lead to meaningful outcomes. As you guide your students through your content, for example, you can ask them to think about and record why the content is valuable or enjoyable to them (or why they don't believe it's useful, or what was most challenging). Giving students the confidence and awareness that they can be critical and provide deep, thoughtful commentary is a skill they will use for the rest of their lives (Pitts, 2021).

- 3. Find ways, however creative, to support a student's entire family from afar.** Having the support of the family is always important, but if your students are learning remotely, it's absolutely critical. As an instructor, you'll need to build ways to increase family connection in your teaching processes. Whether you connect with parents through email or in regularly scheduled conferences, you need to be able to determine what type of support a family needs and figure out how to offer at least some level of assistance whenever possible. On a relatively frequent basis, you should send out surveys to families to see what their specific needs are, and brainstorm on an administration level how you can work to meet those needs. You may also be able to hold recurring parent advocacy meetings, provide resources to parents about social and mental health for families, or ensure that teachers and administrators alike are constantly available to provide parent training and answer parent questions about their students' needs (Pitts, 2021).

### Section 3 Key Points

- Teachers who make a point of greeting their kids in a positive way could be helping their students with their overall wellness.

- In order for school professionals to successfully implement a whole-school approach to wellness, they need to start by getting focused. Then, they need a streamlined leadership team to brainstorm and create a plan.
- While they are waiting for the plan to be implemented, instructors can begin to help their students by teaching and modeling coping mechanisms, self-regulation techniques, and other ways to self-soothe.

## Conclusion

It's time to prioritize social and emotional wellness in our schools, as we know from the latest data findings and recommendations that there is more and more evidence that supports its importance. Investing in our communities, our relationships with our students and families, and in the ways we teach students to learn about their emotions and capacity for empathy will go a long way. At the end of the day, it's key to remember that a well-executed whole-school approach can support the whole child to become happier and healthier in every way possible!

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