

# Well-being and Success

*Opposites that need  
to attract*

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BY ANDY HARGREAVES  
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**CANADA IS A GLOBAL LEADER** in educational change. It has widely-acclaimed results on student achievement and equity on international assessments.<sup>1</sup> Only Finland exceeds Canada in terms of equal opportunity combined with positive outcomes for low-income students. Canada also has stronger democratic self-governance and greater multicultural inclusion than many other high performing systems.

But Canada's record on student well-being is less impressive. UNICEF places Canada 26<sup>th</sup> out of 35 nations on a table measuring well-being across four indicators of life satisfaction, health, education, and income.<sup>2</sup> On OECD indicators of life satisfaction, Canada's students are "not significantly different from the OECD average."<sup>3</sup> Like a number of countries in East Asia, its record on

student achievement is not matched by its performance in student well-being.

In response, Ontario made well-being one of its four policy priorities in 2014. As anxiety and depression among the young skyrocketed, its educators began giving greater attention to their students' emotional, physical, and spiritual development. Our new research from interviews with educators in ten Ontario school boards over the past four years shows that educators started teaching students a range of ways to improve their well-being.<sup>4</sup> Students are now learning meditation, practicing yoga, and serving on school-based mental health committees. Teachers are providing programs of emotional self-regulation that help students calm down when they are angry or anxious, and they are showing

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students how to use apps to report to counselors when they are worried about their own or others' well-being. Educators have also been changing the curriculum to be more inclusive of the identities of all young Canadians (though this is now a point of contention with the province's new government).

But is well-being just a self-indulgent distraction from the basics of real learning? Conversely, is it being used to compensate for the ill-being that is created by standardized testing and out-of-date approaches to teaching and learning? Do achievement and well-being occupy separate silos that have no connection with each other? Or is there a relationship between well-being and success - and if so, what do Ontario's educators believe that it is?

Get the well-being agenda wrong and opponents will easily portray it as emotional self-indulgence or trendy identity politics that are distractions from academic basics. Get the well-being agenda

right, and it will support and be supported by effective learning, so that all our students can be successful *and* well. In their 2017 report on student achievement and well-being, the OECD argued that "most educators and parents would agree that a successful student not only performs well academically but is also happy at school. Indeed, schools are not only places where students acquire academic skills; they are also social environments where children can develop the social and emotional competencies they need to thrive."<sup>5</sup> This is the educational policy challenge for Canadians now.

From 2014 to 2018, our research team from Boston College worked collaboratively with a representative sample of 10 of Ontario's 72 school boards to understand what work they were doing on the ground to implement the province's four pillars of educational reform at the time. These were: achieving broadly defined excellence; securing equity for all students that also involved how included they felt

## **Get the well-being agenda right, and it will support and be supported by effective learning, so that all our students can be successful and well.**

in their learning and their schools; promoting well-being; and establishing public confidence. Part of this research involved interviewing 222 educators about this implementation and asking them questions concerning their beliefs and reported practices about well-being and achievement.

Our interviews with Ontario's educators revealed that they find three different kinds of relationships between well-being and achievement.

1. Well-being is a crucial prerequisite for achievement.
2. Achievement is essential for well-being; failure leads to ill-being.
3. Well-being has its own value: it complements academic achievement.

Let's look at each of these in turn.

### **1. Improved well-being increases achievement**

There are multiple sources of ill-being in many of Ontario's communities. An assistant principal of one rural school stated, "We have a lot of kids that are high-anxiety, with a lot of developmental trauma. A lot of kids are in [foster] care."

"We look at our role as addressing the whole student," a fellow principal said. One of the teachers in this board asked, "How did they sleep? Are they hungry? Are they feeling OK? Are they happy? You are starting bare bones and you work your way up until you they are ready to learn."

Many educators agreed that before real learning could begin, a minimum threshold of well-being had to be attained. They did everything they could to address issues like poverty or social exclusion to prepare their students for academic achievement. A board in a working-class city with a 24.2 percent youth poverty rate (compared to a provincial rate of 17.3 percent) was grateful for the commitment of trades unions and philanthropy. "It's a part of the culture here," one said. "There's huge care around mental health, huge care around the partnerships, huge care around poverty," a colleague observed. "There's this belief in helping others."

Educators in another board reported that ill-being can affect the affluent as well as the poor. "Some of their anxiety is related to parental pressure," a teacher commented. One way that schools supported students in this community was by providing a calming space that helped them to settle down and "just go and relax" when they were stressed or upset.

A superintendent summed up the relationship between well-being and achievement when he said, "Take care of people; take care of everything." But caring for students at risk of ill-being is not sufficient to ensure well-being. Learning requires discipline and zest, the ability to focus, the capacity to empathize with different points of view, the social skills to interact with others, and the stamina to persevere through difficulties and bounce back from disappointment. These dispositions call for positive well-being to support the dynamic learning that leads to widespread success.

### **2. Academic achievement is crucial for well-being**

In a second point of view, well-being is supported by academic success, while failure perpetrates ill-being. Some administrators expressed this idea when they said that they wanted to raise students' mathematics results "to boost their confidence" and to "make them feel good about being learners." Here well-being was regarded as an outcome of deliberate efforts by students and their teachers to secure earned achievement.

Clarity of purpose and direction around improving achievement was also important for both students and their teachers. One school board director stated, "I think it's stressful to waste time and not know where you're going. In the absence of direction, people do what they want. It isn't always the most purposeful thing."

Almost half the boards in our study described projects that put a priority on developing "growth mindsets" among students and their teachers.<sup>6</sup> Compared to fixed mindsets where people believe things cannot change, in growth mindsets, people believe that difficulties, including ones that involve their own learning and development, can be overcome.

A growth mindset orientation was used in one board to promote mathematics achievement in the belief that it would, in turn, contribute to students' self-regulation and resiliency. A special education consultant in this board spoke about "building in mindset activities in every single session" of her coaching with teachers. A teacher in another board gave students the URLs of video clips on growth mindsets to encourage them to work harder to develop a greater sense of accomplishment. By promoting the belief that everyone can achieve, educators treated well-being as a result of hard-won effort, including the effort to achieve academic success.

Having a sense of achievement isn't or shouldn't be all about getting good test scores, though. Having meaning and purpose is integral to people's sense of well-being. Well-being involves far more than happiness, and accomplishments go far beyond test success.

A sense of purpose and accomplishment in this broader sense was behind many learning innovations across the ten boards. These included comparing water quality on First Nations Reserves with that in neighbouring communities, and learning about and raising funds to adopt and accommodate Syrian refugee families, for instance. In cases like these, students deepened their own learning and sense of accomplishment by addressing the well-being of others.

### **3. Well-being has its own value: It complements academic achievement**

Getting back to basics shouldn't mean moving away from well-being. Many East Asian parents and their governments in Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea, for example, now realize that excessive emphasis on tested academic achievement has led to anxiety,



depression and even suicide among young people. They are easing up on testing requirements now and putting greater emphasis on quality of life.

Almost every board we studied addressed students' ability to self-regulate when they became angry, anxious or depressed. One widely used program was called *Zones of Regulation*.<sup>7</sup> Here, students learn to identify their emotions with reference to four categories or colours: *red*, where children are angry or overly exuberant; *yellow* where they are anxious, nervous or silly; *blue* where they are sad or depressed; and *green* when they are calm, alert, and ready to learn.

Educators everywhere were enthusiastic about this program. According to one principal, they were "seeing some gains" because of this approach. Suspension numbers had dropped. "Kids are able to take responsibility for behaviour a little more easily than they used to," the principal said. "They're able to articulate what went wrong." It took less time to calm students down before they could rejoin a class. It was better to give students the time and space they needed to get in the right frame of mind to focus on learning, teachers believed, than to punish them when their minds were racing or their bodies were restless.

Another strategy to support well-being was resiliency. "You build resiliency. You're not born with it," one principal said. One elementary school took the idea of "building" resiliency literally. They developed "toolkits" for students and "built a resiliency wall. Every student had a brick and they could [write] on, 'Who supports me when I'm feeling down?'" Students sometimes searched through these toolkits when they needed help in dealing with a worrying or frustrating issue - from a blockage in their learning to coping with the death of a fellow student.

In Ontario, students have become increasingly engaged in the well-being agenda themselves. For example, one board created student-led well-being groups called *Sources of Strength*. The group consisted of student "leaders from every part of the school. You get kids who aren't the jocks, and they are not the artsy kids. You want it to be representative of everybody." The students received training from mentors at the school. They organized events such as a *Walk for Depression* awareness day, so that students and community members wouldn't ignore any student who was struggling. A student mental health committee in another board consisted of students who were acquainted with problems such as experiencing a friend committing suicide, or being treated for a speech impediment. Elsewhere, in a student-designed poster on "50 Ways to Take a Break," students were encouraged to "sit in nature," "read a book," or "pet a furry creature," for example. In these ways, boards encouraged students to reach out to others with kindness, and make sure that no one was left to suffer alone.

## Putting it all together

In testing times, let's be wary of the cheap shots that are easily made against well-being or achievement. On the one hand, we don't want a school system that is obsessed with well-being to the point where young people live in a superficial and self-indulgent world of

undemanding happiness. That path leads to a nation of narcissistic adults who feel that success and earned expertise are unimportant, and that all that matters is the needs and opinions of themselves and of others who happen to agree with them.

True well-being doesn't come without sacrifice and struggle, perseverance, and empathy for others.

Equally, achievement shouldn't be reduced to grades and test scores where students are expected to apply themselves with grim determination even in the face of poor teaching, irrelevant tests, or a curriculum that is so boring that students cannot see what value it has for them. Achievement should be about accomplishing things of purpose and value for oneself and for others. It should bring a sense of lasting fulfillment, not just test-score completion or evanescent fun.

Well-being is needed to support achievement, especially where children come from backgrounds that present them with great challenges. Achievement and accomplishment are also sources of well-being. It's hard for young people to maintain dignity and self-respect if they feel like they're failing all the time.

But well-being and achievement shouldn't exist in two different worlds, with different specialists populating them - mathematics and literacy people on one side; counselors and mental health specialists on the other. Canada could do better at mathematics. But it is also not doing well at being well. We don't want Canada's schools to produce a nation of happy, stupid people. But we don't want Canada to be a land of smart, sick people either.

Well-being is a long-overlooked policy agenda for schools that is now working its way into education around the world. Our work in Ontario points to many different ways in which educators have eagerly seized the opportunities to develop their students' well-being. But when budget cuts loom, initiatives in yoga or meditation, or support roles in counseling and similar areas, can seem like the easiest options for making economies, compared to literacy or math. To sustain its importance and focus, the emphasis on well-being therefore has to find its proper relationship to the learning mission of schools. Whether we work in times of plenty or in an era of austerity, we shouldn't have to choose between success on the one hand or well-being on the other. Instead, let's turn out young adults who are successful *and* fulfilled at the same time. **EC**

## NOTES

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