What's Wrong

with Well-Being?

Testing the waters—and examining the downsides—of social-emotional learning strategies can improve and strengthen them.

Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley

It can be tempting to whole-heartedly embrace popular new ideas and practices in education. Terms like *resilience, grit, well-being*, or *growth mindsets*, for example, sound wonderful and positive, and it can be easy to fall in love with a new way of thinking.

But our obligation as education professionals is to scrutinize these new concepts for their weaknesses and flaws—not to destroy them, but to engage with them more deeply. This was our idea when we began studying a major "well-being" reform initiative in Canadian school districts. How are social-emotional learning and other well-being efforts working in these districts? What does the term *well-being* mean, anyway? Will programs that teach SEL skills actually get to the root of the issues that put young people's well-being at risk—or are they just providing a temporary fix?

For 10 years, we've been studying 10 of the 72 school districts in Ontario, Canada, investigating how educators within and across these districts work together to spread and embed improvements in learning and well-being so that all students benefit from them. Our research teams have undertaken case studies of each district, interviewed hundreds of educators, and examined policy documents and curriculum guidelines (Hargreaves & Braun, 2012; Hargreaves et al., 2018).

We've discovered many things to celebrate, but have also identified some areas of concern. The questions raised by our analysis invite educators everywhere to scrutinize and look for areas of improvement in their own social-emotional learning and well-being programs.

Spreading Student Well-Being

Before we look at the challenges, let's first examine the ways in which Ontario's well-being reforms are thriving. From the early part of this century, Ontario has gained international acclaim for raising achievement and narrowing achievement gaps, especially in literacy (Campbell et al., 2017). From 2014 on, its new Premier argued that promoting well-being, especially in terms of having "safe and accepting schools," was as important

IKON IMAGES/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

as academic achievement (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). It was important to address "not only the child's academic achievement, but also his or her cognitive, emotional, social, and physical well-being" (p. 14).

Our research revealed that educators welcomed the focus on student well-being, which was evident in practice across all the Ontario districts. Strategies developed by districts and schools included creating:

- Interdisciplinary teams of teachers and mental health specialists.
- Mental health committees that included students who had experienced mental health issues and were willing to help other students.
- Collaborative inquiry into the issues of students who struggled with learning.
- Family support workers.
- Resiliency toolkits to help students bounce back from adversity.
- Programs for emotional self-regulation.
- Mindfulness interventions and yoga routines.
- Attention to educators' well-being as well as that of students.
- Curriculum that exposed the history of oppression of First Nations (Indigenous Canadian) students.

Especially in elementary schools, educators say students are calmer, safer, and feel more included in teaching and learning since schools have tried these strategies (Hargreaves et al., 2018). There is, therefore, a great deal to admire about how much and how well Ontario has spread its well-being strategies across the system.

Questioning Well-Being

In the midst of all this success, though, we also have to ask if there are any problems with the way the well-being reforms are being approached and implemented. Our research points to three areas of possible concern.

1. Systems should not only promote well-being, but also eliminate the causes of ill-being for which they are responsible. Internationally, there is growing concern that pressure for higher test scores causes ill-being (Zhao, 2018). Since the 1990s, Ontario has had a high-stakes testing system known as the EQAO in grades 3, 6, and 9. In our research in the province, we found that educators were critical of how the EQAO brought about stressful situations for students. "I have kids that suffer from anxiety, so putting them into a testing situation like this seems totally wrong," one teacher said. Teachers also criticized the test for having questions with a cultural bias, such as an item about Wayne Gretzky, a Canadian hockey star who might be unknown to an immigrant child; popular culture references that would make no sense to children from traditional Mennonite homes; and an item about the choice of appetizers on a menu that was insensitive to children growing up in poverty.

Educators also expressed concern about students with disabilities or other disadvantages, who were unlikely to succeed on the test but who would still have their scores counted in the school's final profile. These included students with autism, students who were nonverbal, and students who had just arrived from another country and did not yet speak English. Such students would either experience anxiety in taking the test or depress the school's final score if they were excluded and counted as a zero.

In all, the evidence we collected suggested that EQAO assessments contribute to *ill-being* in schools. This led us to report back to Ontario's government and its Premier that the testing system they had inherited was actively at odds with the well-being they were trying to promote in schools. The government set up a review team of its six existing advisors, including one of us, that presented a report in April 2018 that, among other recommendations, proposed

abolishing standardized testing in grade 3 (Campbell et al., 2018). The government accepted this recommendation.[1]

2. There is more than one way to be well. One widely used book in many districts in the province was *The Zones of Regulation: A Curriculum Designed to Foster Self-Regulation and Emotional Control* (Kuypers, 2011). The authors created the zones idea because they found that students were being punished for misbehavior without teachers attempting to understand what the precipitating events were that led to the difficulties. In this program, students are taught to identify and regulate their emotions with reference to four colors. The zones comprise *red zones* of intense emotions like elation, anger, or rage; *yellow zones* of stress, frustration, anxiety, excitement, silliness, "the wiggles," or nervousness; *blue zones* of feeling sad, tired, sick, or bored; and a *green zone* that describes a calm state of alertness in which students are ready to learn.

Teachers and administrators we observed were enthusiastic about *Zones of Regulation*. One elementary teacher we interviewed noted that students

> have a little strip on their desk with the four colors, and they can check in. I will just say to everyone, "What zone are you in?" If they're not in the green zone, which is ready to learn, ready to go, we've got to figure out what we can do.

Educators said they were seeing some gains as a result of this approach. Suspension numbers dropped. "Kids are able to take responsibility for behavior a little more easily than they used to," one principal said. "They're able to articulate what went wrong."

Emotional self-regulation programs put a special emphasis on calmness. But is calm always the best way to be?

So this program sounds like it's working, but let's look a little closer. One danger, for example, is that emotional self-regulation emphasizes some emotions—emotions that can be easily regulated and that make the work of teachers or leaders less difficult—to the exclusion of others. Children and adults also need to address emotions that are not regulated easily. One of these is disgust—a powerful emotion that underpins reactive behavior and that needs to be explored extensively with students, including in discussions of how they feel in relation to others who are different (Hargreaves, 2004). Another difficult emotion is fear, which is related to bullying, to being marginalized or excluded, and to reacting negatively to stresses.

At the same time, in terms of the qualities they promote, emotional self-regulation programs often put a special emphasis on calmness. But is calm always the best way to be? Or is its appeal that it makes teachers' classrooms more manageable? There are important emotions, including joyous and raucous emotions expressed in music, drama, or outdoor play, for example, that may not always make young people so amenable in a traditional classroom. What's more, there are cultural differences in emotionality that some schools should be open to accommodating and building on. Perhaps, if we're aiming for true well-being, the learning environment needs to adjust to this wider range of emotions rather than trying to fit children's diverse emotions into conventional classrooms.

3. There's a tendency to over-rely on individual psychological solutions to solve systemic social problems. We have to believe we can promote children's well-being whatever their circumstances, but also not give up on attacking the existence and persistence of poverty and other causes of ill-being outside the school. Schools should not be expected to solve all the problems that are thrown at them by a society that isn't investing sufficiently in other public services.

Many students have witnessed suicide in their families or have seen family members self-harming, yet are in a system where there is limited support for mental health services. One school district's superintendent was disconsolate that they had lost five students in five months, one of whom, a 10-year-old, "was deemed a high suicide risk" and had sat on a

EL Online Exclusive

Do district officials and policymakers need to up their own social-emotional awareness? See "Boosting SEL in K–12's 'Ivory Towers'" by Judi Vanderhaar at www.ascd.org/el1018vanderhaar.

waiting list for mental health services for eight months without being seen.

Critics have pointed out that concepts associated with well-being, like mindfulness and resilience, run the risk of turning us so inward that we stop looking outward at the things that are causing our problems in the first place (Cederström & Spicer, 2015). It's heroic to keep pulling drowning people from a river. But it's also important to go upstream to stop those who are pushing them in.

Some districts in Ontario have introduced initiatives in yoga and mindfulness for teachers as well as students. These were well received by educators. "We've been talking more and more about mental health with our staff, and they're starting to take care of themselves now," one principal remarked. However, a teacher from the same school said, "There's this belief that, now that you've 'yoga-ed' and meditated, you should be good to go. 'Get to work! Let's go!' " If a few teachers are doing courses on mindfulness, it is likely a positive thing. But if hundreds of teachers are taking these courses in a system that inundates them with initiatives, there may be something wrong with that system.

Minimizing the Downsides of Well-Being

The good news is that for all these risks and challenges to well-being reforms, there are ways to minimize the downsides. Here are some practical ways:

- Improve financial and social supports for vulnerable populations *outside* and not just *within* schools through sufficient funding for mental health services, counseling, and suicide prevention.

We reported to Ontario's leaders that the testing system in schools was actively at odds with the well-being policies they were trying to promote.

- Respond to, embrace, and celebrate cultural differences in emotionality.
- Ensure that programs of emotional self-regulation promote a wide span of emotions, including surprise, fear, and exhilaration—not just ones that calm children down.
- Make sure that students and teachers do not only turn inward to focus on themselves and their relationships with each other, but also look outward to their world and communities, through learning that has meaning and purpose.
- Give standardized tests in fewer grades, less often, and use samples for large-scale assessments like the National Assessment for Educational Progress that do not have high-stakes consequences for individual teachers and schools.
- Build interdisciplinary teams in which teachers can offer each other *solidarity* of support in facing common challenges, as well as *solidity* of strategies, ideas, and different kinds of expertise to respond to them (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

More than most systems, Ontario has been intentional about spreading well-being across its schools. But, like other systems, there are always ways in which it can improve. To do better, we must ask what is wrong with the well-being policies and strategies that we may sometimes love a bit too much—and constantly strive to make them more effective for everyone. EL

[1]A new Ontario government took office in June 2018, and as of the publication of this article, it has not clarified its stance on the testing-change recommendation.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

› The authors invite educators to "look for areas of improvement" in their own social-emotional learning and well-being programs. Take a close look at the SEL program or curriculum your school uses. Do you see any of the problems Hargreaves and Shirley mention here evident?

› Consider the point that aiming for kids' well-being might mean "adjusting to this wider range of emotions [such as exhilaration or fear] rather than fitting children's diverse emotions into conventional classrooms." Do you agree?

References

Campbell, C., Clinton, J., Fullan, M., Hargreaves, A., James, C., & Longboat, K. D. (2018). *Ontario: A learning province.* Toronto, Canada: Government of Ontario.

Campbell, C., Zeichner, K., Lieberman, A., & Osmond-Johnson, P. (2017). *Empowered educators in Canada: How high-performing systems shape teaching quality*. Marblehead, MA: John Wiley & Sons.

Cederström, C., & Spicer, A. (2015). *The wellness syndrome*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Hargreaves, A. (2004). Distinction and disgust: The emotional politics of school failure. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 7*(1), 27–41.

Hargreaves, A., & Braun, H. (2012). *Leading for all: A research report of the development, design, implementation and impact of Ontario's "Essential for Some, Good for All" initiative*. Toronto, Canada: Council of Ontario Directors of Education.

Hargreaves, A., & O'Connor, M. T. (2018). *Collaborative professionalism: When teaching together means learning for all*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Hargreaves, A., Shirley, D., Wangia, S., Bacon, C., & D'Angelo, M. (2018). *Leading from the middle: Spreading learning, well-being, and identity across Ontario*. Toronto, Canada: Council of Ontario Directors of Education. Retrieved from http://ccsli.ca/downloads/2018-Leading_From_the_Middle_Final-EN.pdf

Kuypers, L. M. (2011). *The zones of regulation: A curriculum designed to foster self-regulation and emotional control*. San Jose, CA: Think Social Publishing.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2014). *Achieving excellence: A renewed vision for education in Ontario*. Toronto, Canada: Government of Ontario. Retrieved from www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/about/great.html

Zhao, Y. (2018). *What works may hurt: Side-effects in education*. New York: Teachers College Press

Andy Hargreaves (hargrean@bc.edu) is a visiting professor at the University of Ottawa and, along with **Dennis Shirley** (dennis.shirley@bc.edu), a professor at Boston College. Follow them on Twitter @hargreavesbc and @dennisshirley.