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Increasing Wellbeing – Big Impact Strategies for Wellbeing Leaders in Schools

Increasing wellbeing is easiest when an entire school or community take it on as a core aim. It is easiest when wellbeing becomes everybody's business. Together let's aim to make wellness contagious.

Awareness and Metacognition

Very few of us are as consistently observant of our own wellbeing as we could be. For this reason, we all need to increase our own self-awareness in this area.

As the Delphic oracle advised, *'Know Thyself'*. Metacognition applies to wellbeing as well as to learning and is a goal of schools. This involves knowing how to increase our own wellbeing and what to do on those days when we struggle. This sets us up for success and resilience throughout our lives. There are easy gains all of us can do to increase wellbeing. Self-awareness directly links to self-efficacy. Increasing wellbeing is not a spectator sport.

Track wellbeing

Schools often focus on what is measured. After years of conducting large scale research and surveys on resilience and wellbeing, the approach has shifted to more frequent check-ins. While a number of groups offer check-ins, I have consulted to the Skodel team to create a series of research-based check-ins that gain information for schools on the most foreseeable challenges to student wellbeing at specific times throughout the year.

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Biohacking for Gains

While there is merit in approaches that focus on feelings and wellbeing, emotional literacy and awareness take time to develop. Our quickest gains in wellbeing are biological. When we put our lives back into our natural rhythm we feel, function, and learn better.

Sleep

A school or community that values sleep, lives better and learns better. Having students complete a sleep diary (*) helps students who are outliers become aware that not everyone is up at 2 a.m., gaming. It also helps students identify down times when they will learn least.

Nutrition

Our brains use 20% of our energy. If our bodies are depleted of energy, we can't learn well. Using food to increase mind power, is the emerging area of mitochondrial mental health. There are many sources of recent information on this topic and a free starting point is my paper on, *'Brain Fuel'*.

Strengths Mapping

What is appreciated, appreciates. Having students and their parents go on a treasure hunt to increase self-efficacy by identifying learning strengths (www.mylearningstrengths.com) and using this as a basis for parent meetings as well as differentiation of classrooms,

individualises learning. Have each student create a strengths map (*).

Concentration

There are times we need to sharpen our concentration and there are moments we need to soften and broaden it. The first is needed for focused work and goal setting, the second for creative thinking, problem-solving and memory consolidation. Both are essential skills that can be developed in classrooms (*).

Movement and Exercise

Along with sleep, exercise has a large impact on mood and motivation. Exercise increases mitochondrial output and therefore energy and enhances brain function.

Whether it is sport, dance, down ball, high-impact yoga, or tai chi, it will all increase dopamine and also the growth stimulant of neural connectivity, BDNF.

Culture and Habits

As students like to belong and fit in with others, when we create a culture where everyone is conscious of increasing their wellbeing, the most likely outcome is that students take this on. By and large, students do what they see other people doing. Cultures in schools and communities thrive when people connect with one another, protect one another and respect one another (**CPR**)*

Executive functioning

The six skills that predict success at school and in life are- impulse control, planning, memory, emotional regulation, concentration, and metacognition or knowing your strengths. Acquire these six, and success is fairly well assured. Lack one of these six and success becomes much harder to obtain (*).

Research on developing the 'big 6' is continuing in schools this year.

Peak Learning Times

Just as strengths mapping increases self-efficacy and metacognition, knowing the times of the day when you absorb and think about new information best is like possessing a secret super-power. Generally, students have two of these peak learning periods a day. Discovering these can guide our timetabling as well as helping students maximise their time and efforts.

I am currently conducting research on this with a number of schools and hope to share our findings later this year (*).

Shifting from problem talk to solution talk

Despair and hopelessness disempower and traumatise people. Some of the models of wellbeing used in schools are problem-saturated rather than solution-oriented.

Given that most schools do not have the capacity to provide ongoing intensive therapy, we need to be solution-focused in our approach. We don't improve wellbeing by becoming better at talking about problems. We need to be more interested in how problems end rather than how they begin.

The core skills of solution-focused wellbeing leadership are:

- Shifting the narrative or explanation
- Finding exceptions to the problem
- Framing problems as solvable
- Changing how students view the problem
- Changing how students do the problem
- Increasing strengths and options (*).

CARE- Helpful Conversations

I have been delighted to work with a number of schools as well as with Cricket Australia in developing a process for having helpful conversations with young people. The **CARE** approach (*) is:

Connect

Ask and access strengths

Reassure

Empower

Kindness

Gratitude, empathy, persistence, grit, compassion, mindfulness are all fine words and concepts.

Sometimes, though, I worry that we are overcomplicating the language of wellbeing for young people. Most people know when they are being kind and most know if they are being unkind. If we can create a school or community where we treat other people with just as much kindness that we hope other people will treat us, we will go a long way to improving wellbeing.

Leading Wellbeing

Being a wellbeing leader can be a daunting role. You can feel the responsibility of needing to be the answer to every issue, the ear that everyone wants to be listened by and the shoulder that many people want to cry upon.

There will be days when you will feel like placing a sign on your door stating, '*Complaints Department- please take a ticket and wait in line.*'

Unless you are careful, there will be days when you return home from work, gobsmackingly exhausted barely capable of having another conversation. Unless we are thoughtful and strategic, leading wellbeing can be quite damaging to your own wellbeing.

Implementing even some of the big-ticket, high impact items listed above will create the conditions in which you can act as a positive role model rather than as a warning sign for others about what not to do.

Good luck and thank you for making the world a better place.

The asterisks (*) above indicate particular areas where I can provide more support or information if helpful to you.

More information

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Andrew's websites

www.andrewfuller.com.au

www.mylearningstrengths.com has helped over 45,000 young people in the past year discover their learning strengths.

Books for Parents

Tricky Behaviours

Tricky Teens

The A to Z of Feelings

Unlocking Your Child's Genius (Bad Apple Press)

Book for Teachers

Neurodevelopmental Differentiation- Optimising Brain Systems to Maximise Learning (Hawker-Brownlow)

