

Utilizing dimensions of wellness as a framework for academic success: Strategies for the Pandemic-Era teacher and beyond

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose is to inform elementary and middle school educators about relevant health issues impacting students and suggest strategies for addressing these during the pandemic and beyond. **Methods:** A framework of the emotional, intellectual, and physical wellness dimensions is utilized to examine health issues and implications critical to academic success.

Results: Emotional, intellectual, and physical dimensions of wellness are implicated in a variety of health issues in elementary and middle school. Teachers are the gatekeepers to healthy classrooms, whether in-person or virtual. Educators must be galvanized to understand the pivotal role health plays in student social, emotional, and academic success. **Conclusion:** Health, wellness and social-emotional competence should be emphasized and promoted throughout the school environment, including classroom curricula, policies and supportive practices. Educators must be aware of the signs and symptoms of wellness issues and are obligated to provide appropriate resources when needed.

Keywords: wellness, school health, emotional health, intellectual health, physical health, pandemic

1. INTRODUCTION

In the United States, millions of school aged children spend six to seven hours per day in the typical classroom (CDC, 2020a). The elementary and middle school setting, whether traditional, virtual, or hybrid, provides an unprecedented opportunity for impacting the health trajectory of youth. During the global pandemic and anticipated endemic, the overlapping concerns of health and education intersect in schools, perhaps now more than ever.

Health and education are symbiotic with one necessarily serving and supporting the other (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2020). Wellness is used to describe optimal health and well-being. When a holistic approach is applied to education, it moves the focus from a narrow definition of academic achievement to one that promotes the progressive growth and success of children.

Positive health outcomes and behaviors are linked to higher graduation rates, increased academic achievement, and reduced absenteeism (Kwok et al., 2021). For example, over 16% of students reported not eating breakfast during the week (CDC, 2020b). Additionally, nearly 58% of middle school students fail get adequate amounts of sleep on school nights (CDC, 2020c). Unhealthy children are at an increased risk for negative academic behaviors and the inverse proves true for healthy children (Rattermann et al., 2021). Thus, healthy students are better learners with health and wellness being potential solutions to increasing achievement.

2. METHODS

The purpose of this article is to inform elementary and middle school educators about relevant health issues impacting students and suggest strategies for addressing these during the pandemic and beyond. This article employs the emotional, intellectual, and physical dimensions of wellness as a framework to examine health issues and implications critical to elementary and middle school students. Educators must not only facilitate the learning environment but also address the overlapping emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of students.

3. EMOTIONAL DIMENSION OF WELLNESS

The emotional dimension of wellness involves how individuals feel about themselves, the ability to cope with stress, autonomy, and positive relationships with others (Sparling & Redkin, 2021). Students with emotional wellness are able to manage and communicate feelings appropriately and make conscientious personal choices. Failure to address the mental health needs of young people is linked to poor academic performance, behavioral problems, school violence, substance abuse, suicide, and other negative outcomes (Agnafors, Barmark, & Sydsjö, 2021). Common symptoms include sadness, loss of interest, thoughts of death, apathy, change in appetite, lack of concentration, alcohol or drug abuse, and physical complaints such as headaches or stomachaches.

Nationally, over 16% of children (approximately 7.7 million) experience at least one mental health disorder with half of those not receiving treatment from a mental health professional (Whitney & Peterson, 2019). Students who are under stress and have poor coping mechanisms may become depressed (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). These students may then be at-risk for a variety of health concerns, including but not limited to the development of an eating disorder and self-injury as a means to cope (Stephens et al., 2018). If other factors are apparent, such as bullying or low self-esteem, students may become suicidal especially among females and racial minorities (Lear et al., 2020).

Educators should let students know they care about their emotional wellness by listening and providing support, compassion, and resources. Schedule parent-teacher conferences and encourage students to seek the school counselor, nurse, and support groups. Teachers and other school personnel should be trained in identifying and understanding depression, suicide, non-suicidal self-injury, and eating disorders. Early intervention is essential. For practical resources related to emotional wellness, see Table 1.

Table 1. Practical Resources for the Emotional Dimension of Wellness

Name	Web address	Description
Crisis Trends	https://www.crisistextline.org	Students can text a live, trained crisis counselor any day, any time and receive a response using a secure platform. Topics include Coronavirus, anxiety, depression, suicide, eating disorders, and self-harm.
Go Noodle	https://www.gonoodle.com	Inclusive classroom activities and lessons focus on community wellness, mental and physical health presented in fun, exploratory, and unique ways.
Health Partners	https://www.powerup4kids.org/upload/docs/Feel%20Good%20Lesson%20Plan.pdf	Recharge and Feel Good lesson plan includes stretching and relaxation videos, additional resources, and meets HECAT standards for emotional health.
Nova Teachers	https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/education/activities/2715_thin.html	Dying to Be Thin lesson plan includes a comprehensive look at eating disorders.
Smoke Free Stress Quiz	http://smokefree.gov/stress-quiz	This assessment helps students assess and chart stressful feelings over the last month.

3.1 Depression

Depression is a serious health concern that affects people of all ages, including children and adolescents. Students who are under stress, have a family history of mental health issues, or have experienced a significant loss are at a greater risk for developing clinical depression (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). Research indicates that the onset of depression is occurring earlier in life today than in past decades with a substantial increase in depression symptoms relative to the pandemic lockdown (Bignardi et al., 2021).

3.2 Suicide

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among youth between 10 and 19 years of age (Evans & Sims, 2021). Children who have experienced a personal loss, physical, sexual or emotional abuse, or who suffer from depression or other mental health issues, have a higher risk of suicide (Lear et al., 2020). Children who are contemplating suicide frequently give warning signs of their distress. Teachers, parents, and friends are essential

in identifying behavioral issues and to never take indications of suicide lightly. Consult your school counselor, school nurse, and/or administrator immediately to determine the best way to intervene.

3.3 Self-Injury

Non-suicidal self-Injury (NSSI) behavior can be defined as any behavior performed intentionally and not socially sanctioned that will result in some degree of physical injury to oneself without suicidal intent (Mayo Clinic, 2018). Self-injury is not a one-time event, but a pattern of behavior to cope with unwanted emotions. Although students who engage in self-injury are not suicidal, they are depressed (Cipriano, Cella, & Cotrufo, 2017). Children may self-injure by scratching, picking, biting, or burning of the skin, or pulling out their hair or eye lashes. This behavior may be noticed as scabs that will not heal, pock-marked skin or fresh bruises.

3.4 Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are serious, potentially life-threatening conditions that include anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating. These disorders involve an extreme preoccupation with food, weight and body shape. Children at risk of an eating disorder share similar personality traits such as high anxiety, perfectionism, and obsessive-compulsive behaviors (Dufresne et al., 2020). Contributing factors may include depression, stress, and low self-esteem.

Research suggests that more than half of teenage girls and a third of teenage boys endorse disordered eating behaviors (Yoon et al., 2020). Adolescents may skip meals, fast, vomit, take laxatives, and smoke cigarettes to try to control their weight (National Eating Disorders, 2021). Specifically, among first through third grade girls, 42% express desires to become thinner. Furthermore, approximately 81% of ten year olds are concerned about their weight or afraid about becoming fat.

4. INTELLECTUAL DIMENSION OF WELLNESS

The intellectual dimension of wellness encompasses learning, problem solving and creative enrichment (Sparling & Redkin, 2021). District curriculums commonly include a second language course, art, music, culturally diverse classroom celebrations, and problem solving infused into STEM courses. Three additional strategies to explore for elementary and middle school intellectual growth include sharpening critical thinking skills through current events, service projects, and expanding digital literacy. See Table 2 for practical resources related to intellectual wellness.

Table 2. Practical Resources for the Intellectual Dimension of Wellness

Name	Web address	Description
Federal Trade Commission	https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/files/talking_with_kids_about_being_online_2018.pdf	Talking with Kids About Being Online guides conversations about life online including communicating, socializing, using mobile devices, computer security habits, and child privacy.
National Center for Missing & Exploited Children	https://www.missingkids.org/NetSmartz	Online safety education program including age-appropriate videos and activities to help children become more aware of potential online risks and empowering them to help prevent victimization by making safer choices on- and offline.
National Cyber Security Alliance	https://staysafeonline.org/get-involved/at-home/gaming/	Tips for understanding the risks of and privacy for online gaming for parents, kids, tweens and teens.
National Youth Leadership Council	https://www.nylc.org/blogpost/1721778/The-Generator?tag=Generator+School+Network	Service learning community including news and tools that advance the leadership of youth to become civically informed and engaged.
New York Times Learning Network	https://www.nytimes.com/section/learning	Activities for students and resources for teachers featuring current events, cross-curricular strategies, and other media rich resources.
U.S. Department of Health & Human Services	https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/health-misinformation-toolkit-english.pdf	Toolkit for Addressing Health Misinformation highlights false, inaccurate, or misleading information available on the Internet and urges users to think twice about information read and shared online.

4.1 Current Events

An important component of intellectual curiosity for elementary and middle school students is keeping up with current topics and events in our pandemic and post-pandemic world. There are various strategies educators can use to infuse this important critical thinking skill into the classroom. Journaling, fact checking, discussion of reactions and feelings, and dramatization about news topics facilitate student engagement. Students may choose relevant and legitimate news topics and conduct further research to share during class.

4.2 Serving the Community

As students reintegrate to in-person classes, service learning can be a creative way to deal with the complete isolation and sporadic interactions

spawned from the pandemic (Edutopia, 2021). Service learning is a pedagogical method that combines academic goals with service to the community to enhance intellectual growth and teach civic responsibility (Elmhurst University, 2019). This methodology positively affects student academic performance, engagement, and attitudes towards learning (Youth.gov, 2021; Edutopia, 2021). Approaches to service learning include one-time group projects, ongoing subject-specific projects (such as social studies), and problem-based projects (recycling or a neighborhood garden).

4.3 Digital Literacy

Social media, portable technologies, unregulated access to information, and user created content profoundly impact how students learn and their impressions of their surroundings. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2020), children spend approximately six hours daily watching or using screens and teens spending up to nine hours. This usage may expose students to violence, sexual content, substance use, inaccurate information, and unsafe stunts or challenges. Excessive screen time may lead to sleep disturbances, lower grades, weight and body image problems, less physical activity, and increased mood problems (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2020). Furthermore, social media is an emerging threat as it is increasingly used by traffickers to target youth (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020).

Digital literacy is the ability to use technology competently, interpret and understand digital content and assess its credibility, and create, research, and communicate with appropriate tools (Common Sense Media, 2020). The pandemic has altered the landscape of tween and teen Internet usage for social, entertainment, and creative purposes. Through technology, students are bolstering connectivity in relationships and learning skills and information outside of school. Research indicates that during the pandemic children and youth used digital media to attend virtual clubs or classes, watch TV shows or movies together online, and share or create something with others (Common Sense Media, 2021). Boys (71%) and girls (41%) report participating in online video games with friends at least once a month. More Black tweens and teens, as compared to their White or Hispanic/Latino peers, report an especially important role of digital media during the pandemic for video hangouts (42%), learning how to do something of interest (39%), online watch parties (34%), and digital art/music (28%).

Although digital technologies can enhance learning, educators should teach students how to be safe, responsible, and respectful online. According to Common Sense Media (2020), schools should incorporate digital literacy into their curriculum. Teachers need professional development to facilitate this

learning platform, and parents must be educated as to keep their children safe at home.

For elementary and middle school students, nothing takes the place of adult supervision. Conversations about appropriate technology usage should be ongoing. Students should never share passwords, information about location, pictures, or other personal information without parental permission. People may not be who they seem virtually. Restrict access by keeping computers and phones in a central area, using kid-oriented search engines, avoiding alone screen time, blocking outgoing content, and disabling in-app purchases (Federal Trade Commission, 2018).

5. PHYSICAL DIMENSION OF WELLNESS

Physical wellness encompasses behaviors that protect and promote the health and safety of oneself and others (Sparling & Redkin, 2021). It is deeply intertwined with emotional and intellectual wellness. For the elementary and middle school educators, this category includes topics such as preventing disease transmission, child abuse and neglect, and bullying, and nutrition. For practical resources related to physical wellness, see Table 3.

Table 3. Practical Resources for the Physical Dimension of Wellness

Name	Web address	Description
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/index.html	Learn how to promote hand hygiene at school and in the community with handwashing and sanitizer steps, scientific data, supportive materials and frequently asked questions; includes PDF flyer.
Child Welfare Information Gateway	https://www.childwelfare.gov	Site dedicated to protecting children and promoting their wellbeing includes state resources, related organizations, tools, and podcast.
National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity	https://cspinet.org/protecting-our-health/nutrition/national-alliance-nutrition-and-activity	News and resources to assist development of school wellness policies, promote healthy eating, and reduce illness and premature death.
Stop Bullying	https://www.stopbullying.gov	Information about bullying and cyberbullying including how to establish and enforce policies, rules, and expectations in schools.

5.1 Preventing Disease Transmission

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (2022), one in ten children in the United States have tested positive for COVID-19 since the onset of the pandemic. Millions of students miss school due to a plethora of infectious diseases with over 200,000 hospitalizations each year from flu complications alone (CDC, 2014). Infectious diseases, also referred to as communicable diseases or contagious diseases, are caused by viral, bacterial, or fungal pathogens. There are a variety of strategies that educators can proactively employ to prevent or reduce the spread of these illnesses.

Handwashing is one of the most effective and cost-efficient ways to reduce germ transmission and prevent disease (Black et al., 2016). It can reduce the number of people who get sick with colds by 21% and diarrhea by 31% (CDC, 2014). Educators should teach proper hand-hygiene and schools should provide hand soap, hand sanitizer, paper towels and hot water. Wash hands before and after preparing food, before eating, after coughing, sneezing, after using the bathroom, before and after treating a cut or wound, after touching garbage, and after touching animals or anything in the animal's environment.

In addition to hand washing, wipe down desks, tabletops, desktop computers and doorknobs with a disinfectant regularly. Make sure students have their own designated school supplies instead of shared common objects such as scissors, crayons, rulers, and pencils. Ensure proper ventilation with air filtration systems, running child-safe fans, and opening doors and windows. Avoid touching the face as the eyes, nose, and mouth are common entry points for pathogens. Promote vaccination, encourage students and families to wear masks, practice social distancing, avoid crowds and follow school, district, state, and CDC guidelines.

5.2 Abuse and Neglect

Child abuse and neglect have escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to be a serious public health issue that can have lasting harmful effects on children. Increased maltreatment of children amid the pandemic may exacerbate risks for health problems in adulthood including depression, drug and alcohol abuse, and overall mental health and vulnerability (Cuartas, 2020). There are four common types of abuse seen in children - physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect.

Physical abuse is any act that, regardless of intent, results in a non-accidental physical injury to a child. Signs of physical abuse may include bruises and welts, burns, cuts and scrapes and fractures. Student behaviors may include being afraid to go home, running away from home, hiding

bruising with clothing, complaining of soreness, and aggression or withdrawal.

Sexual abuse is any illegal sexual act upon a child and may include incest, rape, indecent exposure, fondling, child prostitution and child pornography. The student may show age-inappropriate knowledge of sex and sexual behaviors, including highly sexualized play, inappropriate language or sexually explicit drawings. Students may show signs of posttraumatic stress disorder, with poor sleeping patterns and nightmares. (National Sex Offender Public Website, 2021).

Emotional abuse can be difficult to define, but may include belittling or ridicule, intimidation, ignoring or rejection, withholding love, and bizarre forms of discipline. Student behaviors indicating emotional abuse may be habit disorders (sucking, biting, or rocking) poor classroom conduct, sleep disorders, inhibition of play, and self-destructive behavior. Students may also display cruel behaviors such as taking pleasure in hurting other people or animals.

Neglect is caregiver failure to provide for child developmental and related needs. This may include inadequate food, clothing, shelter, or supervision. Neglect may be accompanied by several indicators such as hunger, lethargy, untreated injuries or maladies, and poor hygiene.

Teachers are mandated reporters as required by law to report suspected child abuse and neglect. A teacher is not responsible for proving that abuse or neglect has occurred, only suspicion. Persons designated to receive reports from mandated reporters in schools must make notification when Child Protective Services is contacted and any communication resulting thereafter.

5.3 Bullying and Cyberbullying

Bullying represents a significant problem in our nation's schools. It can create a climate of anxiety, fear and sadness, not only for the victims, but for the bystanders, teachers, and parents as well. Warning signs may include unexplainable injuries, "lost" items, headaches, stomach aches, changes in sleeping or eating habits, loss of interest in school or social activities, self-harming behaviors or talking about suicide (Stopbullying.gov, 2021).

Slightly over a fifth of all students indicate that they are bullied at school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). This includes specific locales such as in the classroom, hallway, bathroom, locker room, cafeteria, outside on school grounds, on a school bus, online or by text. Not every physical or

verbal altercation between children is considered bullying. Bullying is characterized by repeated incidences of physical or emotional harm and a power imbalance between the individuals involved. Research suggests that bullying prevention programs have the greatest impact on children younger than ten years old (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2016).

Both boys and girls engage in bullying, but some differences are evident. Boys typically engage in direct bullying behaviors, including physical assaults or threats (Useche et al., 2021). Girls tend to use more indirect or covert methods of bullying that target relationships. Some of these bullying tactics include intentionally excluding others from activities or spreading rumors. Often students who become bullies are acting out because of stress or abuse at home with discipline being inconsistent, physical, and emotionally inappropriate (Stopbullying.gov, 2021).

Cyberbullying is the form of bullying that makes use of available technology. This may include using email, texting, instant messaging, social media, smartphone cameras, apps, and web sites to harass or bully others. According to seminal work for youth Internet use by Nancy Willard (2011), there are different forms of cyberbullying: flaming, harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing, trickery, exclusion, and cyberstalking. These forms can be difficult to get away from since messages and images can be posted anonymously and distributed quickly to a wide audience.

5.4 Nutrition

With overweight and obesity continuing to be prevalent in children, the importance of proper nutrition in our schools deserves attention and advocacy. According to the CDC (2020b), nearly 42% of youth ate fruit and almost 41% ate vegetables less than once a day. Additionally, 15% of youth consumed soda at least once per day.

The Academy of Pediatrics recommends that schools implement policies and practices that support healthy foods and beverages. Educators can support this effort by working with other faculty to review school wellness policy, and to reduce or eliminate the marketing and promotion of unhealthy foods and beverages. This may include advertising on vending machines and scoreboards, fundraising efforts of extracurricular clubs and sports teams, cafeteria menu items, classroom food policies for celebrations, and even the example set by faculty and staff food and drink choices during the school day.

6. CONCLUSION

One of the characteristics of healthy schools is an emphasis on the health, wellness and social-emotional competence being supported throughout the school environment, including classroom curricula, policies and supportive practices (Association for Middle Level Education, 2021). Teachers are the gatekeepers to healthy classrooms, whether in-person or virtual. Educators must be galvanized to understand the pivotal role health plays in student social, emotional, and academic success. As seen, the emotional, intellectual, and physical dimensions of wellness are implicated in a variety of health issues in elementary and middle school. Teachers must be aware of the signs and symptoms of these issues and are obligated to provide appropriate resources when needed.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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