

Policies and Practices that Aim to Support Student Wellbeing in Schools: Results from a Global Collaborative Action Research Program

With generous support from the **Jacobs Foundation**, and in partnership with the **International Baccalaureate (IB)** and the **Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University**, **Research Schools International (RSI)** led a **collaborative action research program with thousands of educators from across 71 countries**. In this pioneering collaborative action research, we explored policies and practices that schools around the world are implementing in an effort to support wellbeing in students ages 3–18. This booklet shares our findings from that research, woven together with relevant academic research.



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A collaborative action research program on promoting student wellbeing in schools

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A collaborative action research program on promoting student wellbeing in schools

Dr. Christina Hinton and her research team from Research Schools International (RSI) and Harvard collaborated with educators in partner schools to survey educators in 154 schools across 71 countries and analyze the data using mixed methods to explore initiatives that schools are implementing to support student wellbeing. In this project, we used the Wellbeing Research Centre at Oxford's definition of **wellbeing**, which includes **life satisfaction**, **a healthy emotional state**, and a **sense of meaning and purpose**. We created an online survey with multiple choice and open-ended questions on how schools aim to support student wellbeing, which was informed by the academic expertise of researchers from RSI, Harvard, and Oxford on policies and practices that have been shown to support student wellbeing¹ as well as the practical expertise of educators who participated in our collaborative action research program on common wellbeing initiatives in schools. In collaboration with educators from partner schools, we collected online survey data from over 6,000 educators from across 71 countries. We analyzed these data using quantitative analyses to generate graphs related to initiatives schools have put into place in an effort to support wellbeing, which are shared in this booklet. In addition, we analyzed these data using qualitative analysis to identify themes related to the wellbeing policies and practices schools tend to implement, which are discussed in the following sections of this booklet. In this qualitative analysis, we used both "top down" deductive coding with codes based on previous academic research on wellbeing in schools and "bottom up" inductive coding that allowed new, potentially unexpected, themes to emerge. During this process, we trained educators in our collaborative action research program in basic data analysis techniques, enabling them to dig into the data from their own schools. Our research team from RSI and Harvard synthesized findings from across all participating schools to create this booklet.

Results suggest that schools globally are implementing a rich variety of initiatives aimed at supporting wellbeing in students aged 3–18. In this booklet, we share those initiatives, linking them with previous academic research when possible. Academic research has identified policies and practices that can support student wellbeing

1 Hinton et al., 2024; Taylor et al., 2022

Figure 1. Average degree to which educators report their schools support key drivers of wellbeing

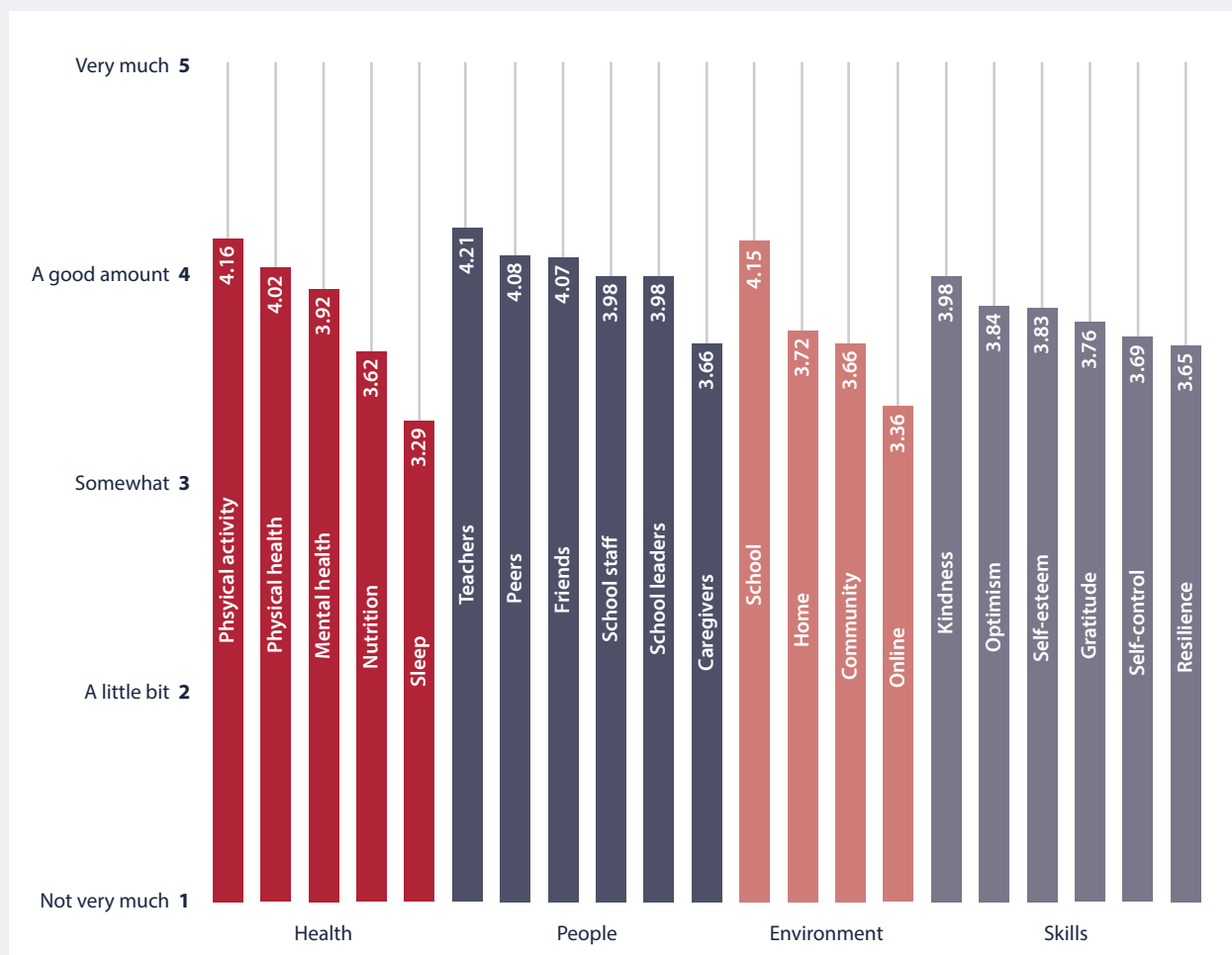


Figure 1 shows the reported average degree to which educators report their schools support various key drivers of wellbeing. The degree is measured on a scale ranging from “Not very much” (1) to “Very much” (5).

in schools². Research has identified many drivers of wellbeing, which the Wellbeing Research Centre divides into the domains of: environment, which includes the home, school, community and online communities; people, including school staff, peers, and caregivers; health, which involves mental and physical health, physical activity, nutrition, and sleep; and character skills, such as resilience, self-esteem, optimism, self-control, kindness, gratitude, and the ability to cultivate a sense of meaning and purpose. Figure 1 shows the degree to which educators across schools participating in the collaborative action research program report that their schools support these key drivers of wellbeing, on average.

Results from our collaborative action research identified **promising practices and policies that schools around the world are implementing in an effort to support student wellbeing**. These initiatives include those that target relationships, the development of character, physical and mental health, and exploration of the arts

and play in schools as well as those that extend beyond the school walls to nurture connections with families, the broader community, and our natural environment. The results from our research reveal that initiatives that schools around the world are implementing in an effort to support student wellbeing principally fall into the following categories:

- Initiatives that foster positive relationships in school
- Character skill interventions and programs
- Mental health initiatives
- Activities to support physical health
- Music and the arts
- Playfulness and humor
- Initiatives that support connections with families
- Initiatives that support connections with the broader community, including service learning
- Connecting with nature

For each of these areas, drawing on the results of our collaborative action research program, we share illustrative examples of policies and practices implemented by schools around the world. In addition, we contextualize these policies and practices in academic research.

Initiatives that foster positive relationships in school

A wealth of research demonstrates that positive relationships are fundamental to student wellbeing across ages and cultures³. Warm, caring relationships with both educators and peers support students' emotional regulation, happiness, and life satisfaction⁴. Social relationships can also act as a buffer against mental and physical health issues, with social connectedness associated with better immune system health, less depression, less social anxiety, higher levels of self-esteem, and a lower risk of suicide⁵.

Randomized-controlled experimental studies have demonstrated that interventions targeting teacher-student relationships can effectively foster stronger teacher-student bonds as well as increase prosocial behaviours, academic achievement, and wellbeing among students⁶. The schools in our research described innovative interventions to support **teacher-student relationships**. For example, a school in Bolivia established a "Department of Wellbeing" where students can

3 Cotterell, 2007; Danielsen et al., 2011; Dunleavy & Burke, 2019; García-Moya et al., 2019; Hinton et al., 2024)
 4 Blazar & Kraft, 2017; Fraser et al., 2004; Goswami, 2012; Katz et al., 2020; Demir & Weitekamp, 2007; Holder & Coleman, 2009; Marshall, 2001; OECD, 2019
 5 Foster et al., 2017; Maes et al., 2017; Holt-Lunstad, 2022
 6 Borman et al., 2021; Cook et al., 2018; Hoogendijk et al., 2020; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Harsejghasemi et al., 2022

go to speak with educators whenever they need support, which educators report strengthens teacher-student relationships. A school in Colombia introduced “Teacher-Student Forums,” which give students an opportunity to share feedback and ideas with educators. An educator there described how these forums help build strong relationships and a supportive school culture:

“This not only enhances the sense of mutual respect but also empowers students to actively engage in their educational experience. The collaborative approach extends beyond classrooms, creating a positive ripple effect throughout the school, reinforcing the idea that everyone, regardless of their role, plays a vital part in the educational community. This policy helps build strong relationships, fostering a supportive and inclusive school culture.”

Another way that schools can support teacher-student relationships is by offering educators training in relevant skills⁷. A number of schools reported offering educators training on social-emotional skills and wellbeing (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Reported average frequency of educator trainings to support wellbeing

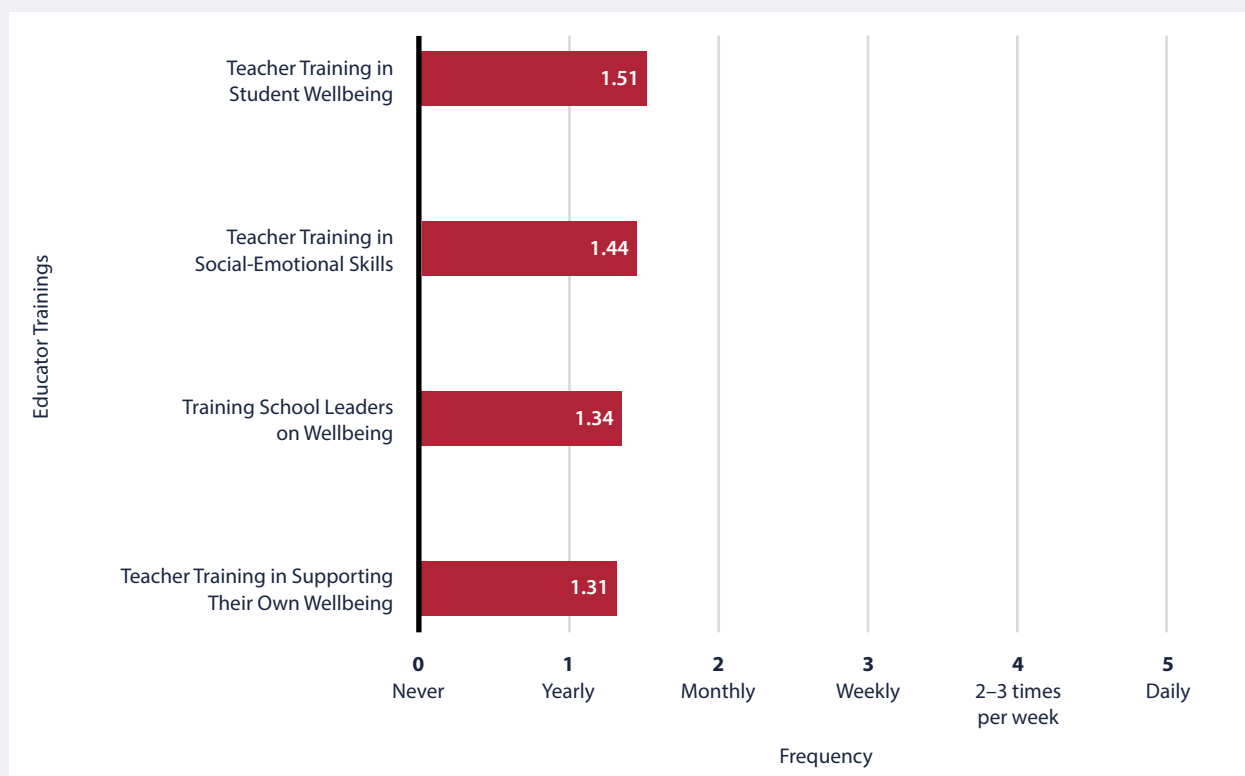


Figure 2 shows the reported average frequency of educator trainings that aim to support wellbeing. The y-axis represents the types of educator trainings offered, while the x-axis indicates the frequency of implementation. The frequency is measured on a scale ranging from “Never” (0) to “Daily” (5).

Research suggests that **educator trainings in social-emotional skills and wellbeing** are most effective when they are directly relevant to practice and provide support over time, for example, by being spread out over several months or by offering follow up coaching and resources⁸.

Many educators highlighted that activities beyond the classroom have great potential to support teacher-student bonds. As one Canadian teacher explained:

“Students interact with faculty outside of the classroom through organized activities such as paddling, hiking, or developing non-academic skills. This interaction between teachers and students fosters the understanding of each other as humans rather than rigid roles within a classroom.”

A Danish teacher emphasized a similar point, noting that initiatives like **field trips** help teachers and students get to know one another personally and ensure that *“all students have teachers that they can go to if they need help, guidance or advice.”* Indeed, research suggests that field trips can help build students’ social-emotional skills and support teacher-student bonds⁹. Some schools implemented a “Week Without Walls” program that provided an experiential learning experience outside of the classroom

8 Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2017

9 Dillon et al., 2006; Erickson et al., 2024



for students and supported relationship building. An educator from South Korea reflected on the program, saying that the Week Without Walls program builds trust among students. Another educator from the same school noted:

“The Week Without Walls program encourages students to work with other students they may not be in class with in an environment that is unfamiliar to them. They engage in a number of team building activities, no phones are allowed and they work together with their homeroom teachers and different students.”

Alongside initiatives to support relationships among educators and students, the partner schools in our collaborative research also implemented a variety of activities to support **relationships among peers**. Educators described a range of activities that they believe strengthen student relationships at their schools, ranging from organized sports to team-building activities to collaborative art projects. For example, an educator from Sweden described “extra curricular activities after school such as art clubs, homework clubs and sports clubs” as supportive of student relationships, along with community days:

“At our school we have community days where students from all year levels take part in activities together. During these days students do activities together and get to know each other. You can often see that after these days there is more interaction between the older and younger students.”

Educators across several countries reported that they found **buddy programs** that pair older students with younger students particularly helpful for fostering positive student relationships. In a buddy program at a school in Zambia, younger students are paired with older students who support them with their schoolwork, sit with them during school assemblies, and collaborate with them on school projects. One educator from that school suggested that this system breaks down barriers, promotes a sense of belonging, and creates a greater sense of community for both younger and older students. Likewise, educators at a school in Ghana described a buddy program in which new students are paired with older students to help them learn about the school’s routines and expectations and meet new friends; an educator there noted, *“This policy promotes inclusivity, friendship, and a sense of belonging, creating a supportive network that helps new students feel welcomed and integrated into the school community.”* A teacher in Belgium echoed a similar idea, sharing that their buddy program, *“not only strengthens bonds among students but also contributes to the development of social skills, empathy, and leadership.”* Indeed, research has linked buddy systems with prosocial behavior¹⁰, positive peer relationships¹¹, and better educational outcomes¹².

10 Valiente et al., 2020

11 Morris et al., 1995

12 Wentzel, 1998

Many schools also highlighted **conflict-resolution programs using restorative practices** as a useful approach for maintaining positive peer relationships and supporting student wellbeing. Research suggests that restorative practices are associated with improvements in students' sense of belonging¹³ and reductions in disciplinary issues¹⁴. One educator in Singapore reflected on their school's restorative practices, *"This approach supports positive peer relationships by enabling learners an opportunity to be heard and an opportunity to listen in a conversation that is mediated through a restorative conversation."* Another educator from that school added, *"When implemented properly, this [restorative practice] is very effective for most learners. It gives learners a voice and empowerment."*

Survey respondents also described **anti-bullying policies and initiatives** as supportive of positive student relationships. For example, a school in India noted, *"our school has an inclusion policy and zero tolerance towards actions like bullying,"* and a school in Ghana explained that their school has *"a comprehensive policy that addresses all forms of bullying, including verbal, physical, and cyberbully."* Several schools reported instituting KiVa, a research-based program to prevent and address bullying¹⁵, which has been shown to promote empathy and positive peer relationships¹⁶. A Dutch teacher noted that KiVa's lessons *"provide excellent resources to nurture positive and healthy peer relationships among students."* One educator from Luxembourg emphasized the value of the program's focus on bystander intervention, sharing that the program encourages students to be assertive and speak up when they see bullying.

Through a variety of initiatives, such as teacher training, activities that provide opportunities for students to bond with educators, buddy programs, and anti-bullying policies and programs, the schools in our collaborative action research program report actively nurturing supportive and connected school communities.

Character skill interventions and programs

Developing students' **character and social-emotional skills** is foundational for supporting wellbeing for students across ages and contexts¹⁷. Research demonstrates that interventions focused on developing character skills can enhance students' happiness, health¹⁸, prosocial behavior and relationships¹⁹, and academic outcomes²⁰, while reducing negative outcomes such as bullying, substance abuse, absenteeism,

13 Darling-Hammond, 2023; Kehoe et al., 2018

14 González, 2015; Wachtel, 2016

15 Herkama & Salmivalli, 2017

16 Karna et al., 2011

17 Bonell, 2018; Dix et al., 2020; Durlak, 2011; Hurry, 2021; Lindorff, 2018; Sklad, 2012; Taylor et al., 2017; VanderWeele and Hinton, 2024; Wigelsworth, 2016

18 Bavarian et al., 2016; Curry et al., 2018

19 Alan & Ertac, 2018; Ashdown & Bernard, 2012

20 Alan et al., 2019; Ashdown & Bernard, 2012

suspensions, and school dropout²¹. Results from our collaborative action research program illustrate that schools around the world are focusing on character skill-building to help lay a robust foundation for students' wellbeing. Schools report implementing a variety of policies and practices that aim to support students' character skills. Figure 3 shows the average frequency of various policies and practices that aim to support students' character skills across the schools that participated in our study.

Figure 3. Reported average frequency of policies and practices that aim to support students' character skills

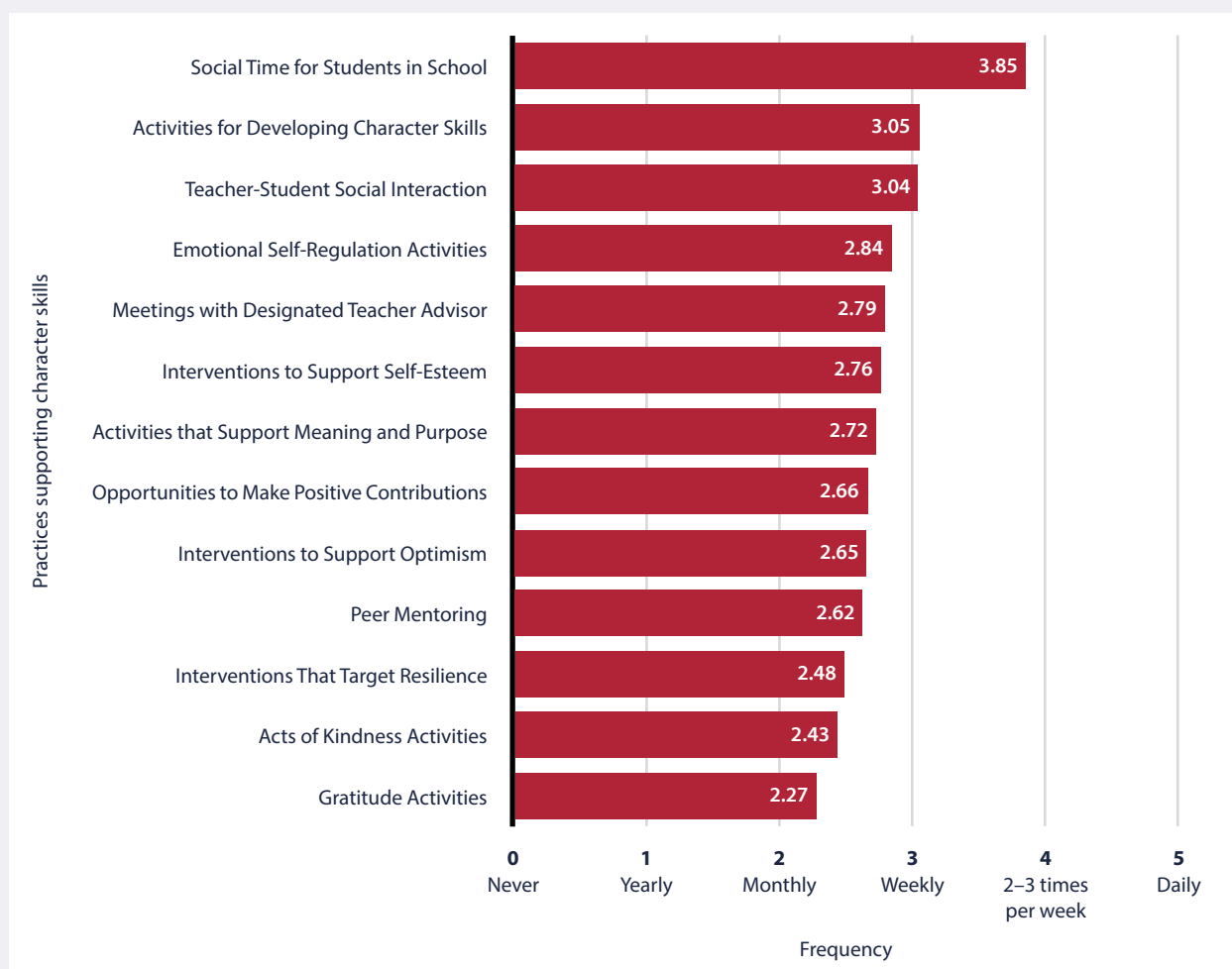


Figure 3 shows the reported average frequency of policies and practices that aim to support students' character skills. The y-axis represents the various practices that may support character skills, while the x-axis indicates the frequency of those practices being carried out. The frequency is measured on a scale ranging from "Never" (0) to "Daily" (5).

Research suggests that effective character programs tend to include a significant **teacher training** component²². Many schools described such programs. For example,

21 Andersen et al., 2018; Bonell, 2018; Duncan et al., 2017; Li et al., 2011; Sklad, 2012; Snyder et al., 2009

22 Adi et al., 2007

a teacher in Norway noted, *“teachers are trained to incorporate these skills through professional development seminars.”* While the average frequency of educator trainings across all participating schools was just a bit more than once a year, a few schools offered significantly more training, for example, a school in Cyprus offers 1.5 hours of training each week.

Many educators reported that these professional development opportunities help them **embody and encourage social-emotional skills in everyday interactions** with students. Research shows that modeling and positive encouragement are important for embedding character skills into school culture and daily interactions²³. Many educators in our study emphasized that frameworks such as the IB Learner Profile and Approaches to Learning offer structured support for implementing character education practices consistently and meaningfully. A teacher in Ghana expressed:

“The IB Learner Profile is consistently discussed and modeled by both educators and students. In class and during co-curricular activities, we practice being caring and open-minded. When students display these attributes, they are celebrated and encouraged to keep embodying them.”

Many educators asserted that such **visible modeling** and encouragement contributes to an affirming school culture, where students learn through example and feel empowered to embody these attributes themselves.

Several educators also described the **continuous reinforcement** of character skills in their schools as a key ingredient to uptake by students. A teacher in the Netherlands described how, *“The constant emphasis on Learner Profile attributes leads to a strong understanding—even in Early Years—of positive characteristics.”* Another teacher in Zambia reinforced, *“The Learner Profile is chatted about in the classroom, on the stage, the soccer pitch, and beyond.”* Many educators also emphasized the importance of providing students with opportunities to **practice and reflect** on these skills in various contexts.

Additionally, research shows that **blending character skills with academic content** can improve outcomes in both areas²⁴. The schools in our collaborative action research program reported using this approach to character development. For example, one teacher in Turkey noted, *“As a PYP school, we incorporate Learner Profiles into every class. These ongoing discussions bring character skills into report cards and assessments, making them integral to academic growth.”* By embedding character skills in lessons, assessments, and reflections, schools aim to ensure that these skills become foundational to learning and wellbeing.

Schools also reported implementing a variety of **interventions to target specific character skills**, such as **kindness, gratitude, emotional regulation, resilience,**

23 Berkowitz & Bier, 2007

24 Brush et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2011

and **meaning** and **purpose** — skills that research shows are foundational to student wellbeing and learning²⁵. For example, a teacher in the United States shared how their “**Kindness Club**” fosters a supportive community by organizing activities where students acknowledge acts of kindness among peers, aligning with findings that kindness supports positive relationships and social outcomes²⁶. In Sint Maarten, a **school policy designates service learning as a requirement** to graduate. An educator from the school explained how engaging students in service learning is meant to support character development, *“the objective is to develop social awareness in the students while building their self-esteem, social and civic connections to their communities.”* To cultivate gratitude, a school in India introduced a “**Gratitude Wall**,” where students and teachers post notes of appreciation, while a primary school in Cyprus incorporates gratitude discussions into a weekly Wellbeing Hour. Such simple gratitude practices have been shown to enhance students’ sense of belonging and life satisfaction²⁷.

Cultivating **emotional regulation and resilience** is another focus. Many schools offer **mindfulness programs**, such as one at a school in Germany that includes breathing exercises intended to promote stress management and wellbeing. Research shows that emotional regulation is critical for both mental health and learning, equipping students to navigate challenges and build resilience²⁸. Resilience, defined as the *“capacity to bounce back from adversity,”*²⁹ is also prioritized; in Denmark, students learn to “fail well,” while in India, weekly social-emotional learning classes focus on building resilience skills.

Finally, partner schools from our collaborative research foster **meaning and purpose** through opportunities like the IB Middle Years Programme Personal Project and units of inquiry such as “Sharing the Planet,” **encouraging students to reflect on their values and make meaningful contributions to their communities**. Studies indicate that **cultivating a sense of purpose** enhances motivation, engagement, and wellbeing³⁰. The schools that participated in our research project shared a wide variety of promising practices to nurture students’ character skills.

Mental health initiatives

The increasing prevalence of **mental health** challenges among children and adolescents highlights an acute need for schools to implement effective interventions³¹, a need recognized and supported by many of the schools in our collaborative research. Research suggests that effective school-based interventions can simultaneously improve mental health outcomes while offering cascading positive

25 Hinton et al., 2024; Layous et al., 2012; Daniel et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2022

26 Flook et al., 2015

27 Diebel et al., 2016

28 Daniel et al., 2020; Moltrecht et al., 2021; Morrish et al., 2018

29 Allen, 2014, p.4

30 Hill & Burrow, 2012; Riches, 2020

31 Wong et al., 2021

effects such as strengthening school communities and academic engagement³². Figure 4 shows the average frequency of policies and practices that aim to support student mental health access across the schools that participated in our research project. For example, most schools reported **regularly available counselling sessions**, approximately monthly **anti-bullying interventions**, and **assemblies** on bullying at least once per year.

Figure 4. Reported average frequency of policies and practices that aim to support students’ mental health

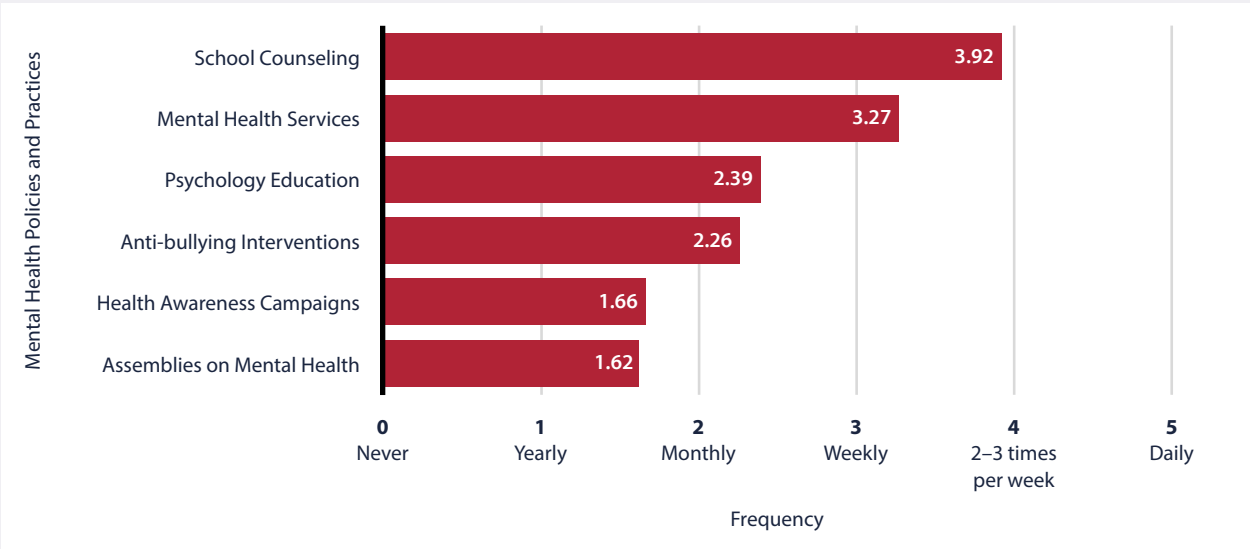


Figure 4 shows the reported average frequency of policies and practices that aim to support students’ mental health. The y-axis represents the various practices and policies to support their mental health, while the x-axis indicates the frequency of those practices being carried out. The frequency is measured on a scale ranging from “Never” (0) to “Daily” (5).

Schools from around the world reported introducing structured **mental health policies** as a cornerstone of their mental health strategies, aiming to foster consistent and equitable support for student wellbeing. As an educator in Ghana highlighted, *“The mental health policy at our school creates a positive and inclusive environment where students feel safe, supported, and empowered to seek assistance when needed.”* Meanwhile, some schools are experimenting with innovative approaches like “Wellbeing Wednesday,” where academic hours are reduced midweek, providing students and staff with two additional hours every Wednesday set aside for self-care. Recognizing the negative impact that digital devices can have on mental health³³, a school in Serbia has created a policy around screen usage. An educator at the school described that this policy *“physically distances students from mobile phones and tablets when they are not required for class activities.”*

32 van Loon et al., 2020
33 Columbia University Department of Psychiatry, n.d.; Presta et al., 2024



Many schools involved in our collaborative research also reported **integrating mental health into academic curricula** to normalize mental health discussions and equip students with lifelong wellbeing strategies. For example, a teacher in Denmark described how mental health topics are embedded across subjects: *“Teachers across the curriculum have units of learning that explore mental health. For example, in my own French class, the MYP 5 students have discussed stress and anxiety and produced posters raising awareness of stress with advice on how to manage it.”*

Similarly, an educator in India discussed their school’s policy of embedding social-emotional learning into lesson plans to balance emotional and academic growth, while an educator in Ecuador reported incorporating nutrition education and mindfulness practices in class to address both physical and mental health in tandem. These efforts reflect a common theme reported by educators — a growing recognition that mental health initiatives must be multifaceted, weaving wellbeing into the fabric of school life to empower students with lifelong strategies for resilience and self-care.

Dedicated **counselling teams** are becoming standard in many schools. For example, a school in Ghana employs a multi-tiered approach that includes counsellors, support staff, and even student wellbeing senior student prefects who facilitate peer-led support sessions. These layers of intervention seek to create a network of care, enabling students to access help from multiple touchpoints. Another school in Turkey designed a comprehensive counselling model, with psychologists working not only with students and educators, but also with parents to reinforce wellbeing at school and home.

Many schools are experimenting with **mindfulness** in an effort to promote emotional regulation and reduce stress among students and educators³⁴. A school in Germany, for instance, described incorporating a “mindful minute” after recess: *“Typically, after recess, the students sit down for a mindful minute. They take time to calm down after playing outside and transition their brains from a playful/energetic state to a calm/relaxed state that’s ready to learn.”*

Similarly, a school in Vietnam embeds mindfulness into routine activities like circle time and reflection periods. A school in Ecuador frames mindfulness as a communal

34 Zenner et al., 2014

practice that can foster belonging and safety among students: *“These daily practices with our students reinforce the importance of developing the ability to recognize bodily sensations, learning how to take our bodies back to a calm state, and practicing love rituals to reinforce our sense of belonging and safety in each class family.”*

Some educators asserted that, in their view, these practices not only support individual mental health but also enhance classroom dynamics by reinforcing empathy and collaboration.

Lastly, educators reported an increasing turn towards **monitoring systems to track student mental health** and overall wellbeing, enabling interventions to be tailored to students’ needs. A school in Bolivia, for example, uses behavioral monitoring to track socio-emotional wellbeing and offer targeted support. Similarly, a South Korean school conducts bi-weekly surveys to identify at-risk students. Schools in Ghana and Kosovo noted using tools like CloseGap and UpStrive apps for daily emotional health check-ins during homeroom, where students reflect on their emotions and moods of the day, and teachers follow up on student comments. Figure 5 below shows the average frequency of wellbeing monitoring among the schools in our study, with students’ wellbeing monitored approximately weekly, on average, and educators’ wellbeing typically monitored less frequently.

Schools globally are adopting diverse strategies to address mental health, from integrating wellbeing into curricula to innovative practices like in-class mindfulness and emotional monitoring. These initiatives highlight the growing emphasis on fostering holistic support for student wellbeing.

Figure 5. Reported average frequency of wellbeing monitoring

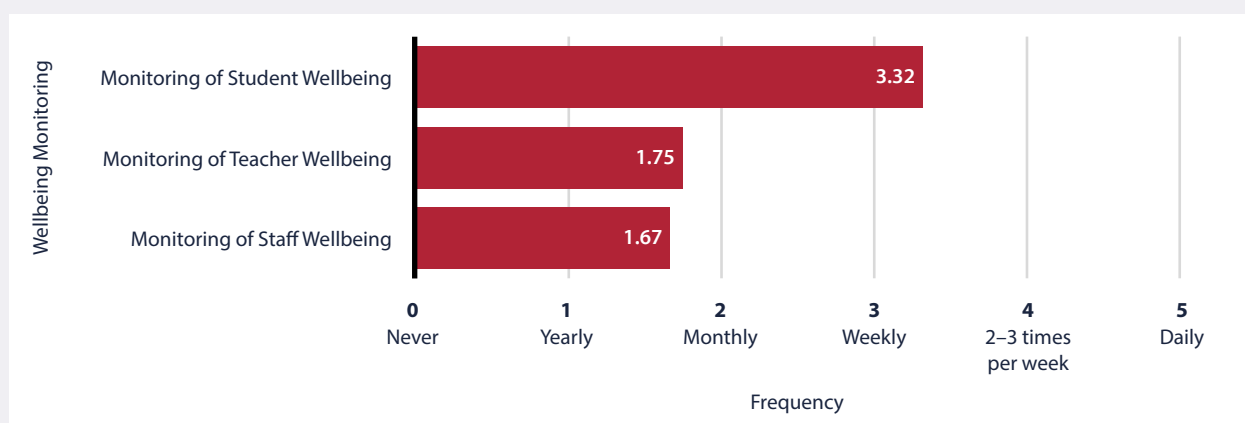


Figure 5 shows the reported average frequency of wellbeing monitoring. The y-axis represents the wellbeing monitoring of various populations, while the x-axis indicates the frequency of the monitoring occurring. The frequency is measured on a scale ranging from “Never” (0) to “Daily” (5).



Activities to support physical health

Most schools in our study reported having policies and practices in place to maintain students' **physical health**. Physical activity interventions in schools have been shown to improve health as well as enhance concentration, prosocial behavior, and social connectedness³⁵. Figure 6 shows the average frequency of policies and practices implemented across the schools in our study to support students' physical health, with most schools regularly engaging students in activities such as **physical education**, **sports**, **active free play**, or **active learning**.

35 Drollette et al., 2018; Lakes & Hoyt, 2017; Mahar et al., 2006

Figure 6. Reported average frequency of policies and practices to support students' physical health

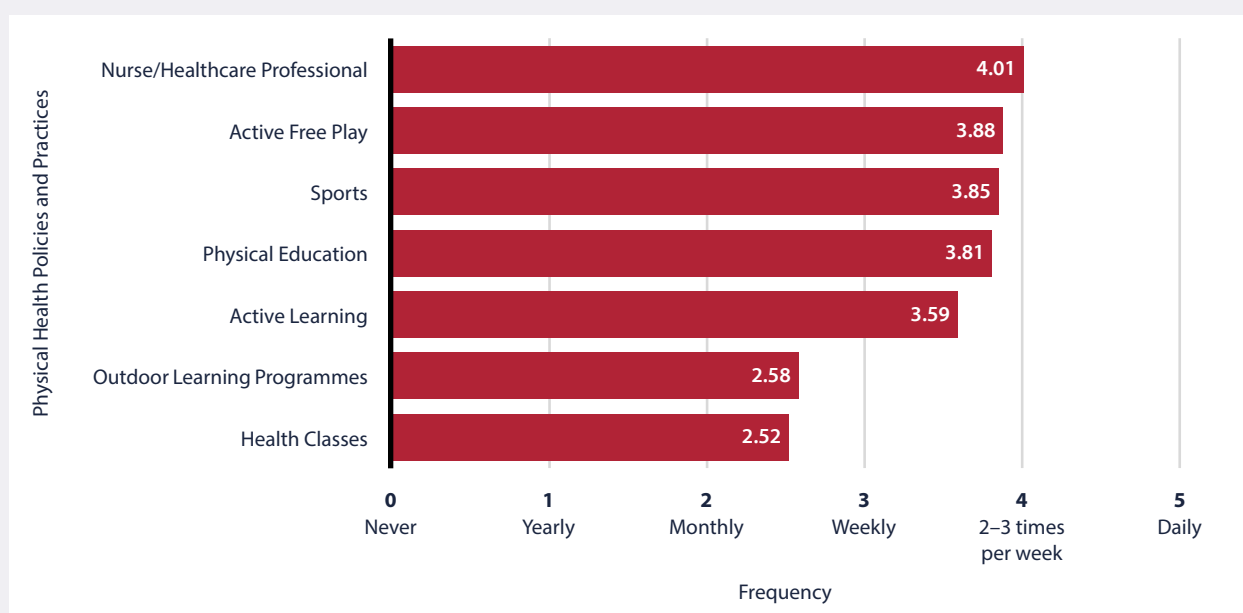


Figure 6 shows the average frequency of policies and practices that aim to support students' physical health. The y-axis represents the various practices and policies to support their physical health, while the x-axis indicates the frequency of those practices being carried out. The frequency is measured on a scale ranging from "Never" (0) to "Daily" (5).

Most schools have implemented **physical education** policies that engage students in physical activity several times per week. For example, a UK-based school mandates that all students practice **sports** at least three times a week. Meanwhile, a school in Canada requires students to take physical education classes up through 16 years old and encourages students to continue with sports beyond that. One educator described how that school builds a strong culture around physical activity by making sports accessible to all students and supporting sporting events: *"We have various sports where there are no cuts, and anyone and everyone can play. We encourage all students to support our athletes and their teams by attending sporting events."* A school in the UAE implements a creative physical activity initiative called "Fitness Fridays," in which students, teachers, and staff participate in their choice of physical activity to start the day. Educators from the school lauded the initiative as a fun way to give both students and educators a "boost" and promote community-wide physical health.

Other schools **integrated physical activity into classroom learning**. An educator from India shared that their school *"seamlessly weaves physical activities into various transdisciplinary lessons, promoting a connection between movement and academic learning."* Several schools also **incorporate "movement breaks" into lessons** to help stimulate students. An educator from Thailand explained, *"Teachers are encouraged to integrate short, energizing breaks into their lessons, allowing students to stretch, move, and rejuvenate their minds. This practice supports physical wellbeing and enhances students' ability to focus and engage in learning."* Research supports this approach, as **movement-based learning** can improve students' executive functioning and academic performance³⁶.

Beyond physical activity, many schools also promote **healthy nutrition and sleep habits**. A growing evidence base suggests that school support for healthy eating habits is associated with better nutritional outcomes as well as academic performance³⁷. Although more research is needed, some studies suggest that sleep programs in school can have a positive relationship with students' long-term sleep habits³⁸. In our research, many educators reported that they incorporate information on nutrition and sleep into class curricula. As one educator from a school in India explained, *"We integrate lessons on the importance of rest and recovery, including sleep hygiene practices and the impact of sleep on overall wellbeing and academic performance."* Other schools partnered with dietitians or organized initiatives like "Wellness Week" to focus on the importance of eating and sleeping well. The educators who participated in this collaborative research emphasized that integrating physical activity, nutrition education, and sleep hygiene practices into their schools creates a holistic approach to student wellbeing that supports both physical health and academic achievement.

36 Best, 2010; Chou et al., 2020; Donnelly et al., 2009

37 Baltag et al., 2022; World Health Organization, 2021

38 Busch et al., 2017; Colt & Reilly, 2019; Gaskin et al., 2024

Music and the arts

A significant body of research illustrates that participating in **art and performing arts activities** at school can be beneficial to student wellbeing³⁹. Art and performing arts programs have been shown to support wellbeing by tightening social bonds, establishing connections between schools and the surrounding community, promoting students' physical and mental health, and deepening students' social-emotional skills⁴⁰. The schools from our collaborative action research are implementing a wide variety and depth of programs for students in the arts.

The vast majority of the schools reported providing students with meaningful **art and performing arts** opportunities for **deepening social connections**. Research indicates that **group music, drama, and dance** programs can support social bonds between peers and between students and teachers⁴¹. Several schools highlighted the value of such programs for strengthening relationships. An educator in Germany, for example, noted that, *"The best place to see good relationships between faculty and students ... is the drama musicals and choir where students and faculty are given extended time to get to know each other and build relationships."* Echoing this, an educator in Bolivia reported that co-curricular activities in music are bonding experiences for

39 Pesata et al, 2022; Van de Vyver et al, 2019

40 Archbell et al., 2019; Farrington et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2017

41 Archbell et al., 2019; Harland et al., 2000; Lee et al., 2017; Pitts, 2007; Wolf, 1999



members of the school community. Similarly, educators in Japan discussed how their school offers a robust music program that includes a strong cultural component in which students share music from their own cultural background with one another, and emphasized that this program creates a unique bonding experience among students as they learn about each other's cultures and connect through music and song sharing.

Meaningful arts-infused experiences for students in our partnering schools also come in the form of special school-wide **festivals to celebrate diverse cultures**. Of note is a Culture Fest at a school in Sint Maarten where all students work in groups to present an exhibition of their culture through dance, poetry, song, food, and story. Members of the surrounding community are invited to attend this school-wide festival, creating broader social connections through arts and culture for the students beyond the school. In the same vein, a school in the US hosts a United Nations Day for the local community filled with music and dance recitals. An educator from the school describes the event as, *"our gem of the school... it promotes healthy interactions with our community."*

Involvement in arts and performing arts programs is also associated with **positive physical and mental health**⁴². Many schools in our global study are integrating dance and **choir** programs into the fabric of the school curriculum. This approach is backed by research, which suggests such programs can reduce stress, provide physiological support, and lead to improvements in mood⁴³. Many schools in our study report offering regular opportunities for students to participate in dance at school. Some schools have even **embedded dance into the required curriculum** for students. At a school in India, dance, along with other forms of physical activity, is compulsory. Similarly, a school in Ghana has a devotion to **arts-based movement activities** built into the school day, with an educator explaining, *"[our school] encourages the community to take seriously exercising the body through dance sessions, physical activities, and music sessions."* School-based singing programs have been reported to reduce stress and increase positive mood⁴⁴. Partner schools in Germany and the UAE offer robust choir programs for students to rehearse and perform regularly throughout the school year for the whole school community. In the Netherlands, one school provides students with a unique opportunity to take part in special **projects with professional opera and choir companies** in Amsterdam.

Finally, schools are promoting student wellbeing through integrated arts activities that research has linked with the **development of social-emotional skills**, such as self-esteem, competence, and motivation⁴⁵. For example, an educator at a school in

42 Gillam, 2018

43 Beck et al., 2000; Clift & Hancox, 2001; Fong Yan et al., 2018; Harland et al., 2000; Kokotsaki & Hallam, 2011; Theocharidou et al., 2018

44 Clift & Hancox, 2001

45 Bamford & Glinkowski, 2010; Bolden et al., 2021; Catterall et al., 1999; Farrington et al., 2019; McArdle et al., 2002; Osborne et al., 2016; Welch et al., 2011

India articulates how important social-emotional skills are bolstered through arts activities:

“Our school is fostering creativity by providing opportunities for students to express themselves through art, music, drama, and other forms of creative expression. This not only helps students develop their artistic skills but also enhances their confidence, self-esteem, and problem-solving abilities.”

In Turkey, a school offers students weekly opportunities to **share their artistic work through assemblies** with the rest of the school. An educator from the school reflects on the value of this practice: *“When [students] feel ready they can perform something that they want to share with others. It can be a song, ... a dance, [work of] drama, a poem with the rest of the school community. Students feel that their ideas are important.”*

As seen in Figure 7, educators reported that music and arts activities, including visual arts, music, and performing arts, are commonly offered on a weekly basis. By integrating these programs into school life, schools around the world champion a holistic approach to education that enriches both individual growth and community wellbeing.

Figure 7. Reported average frequency of music and arts activities

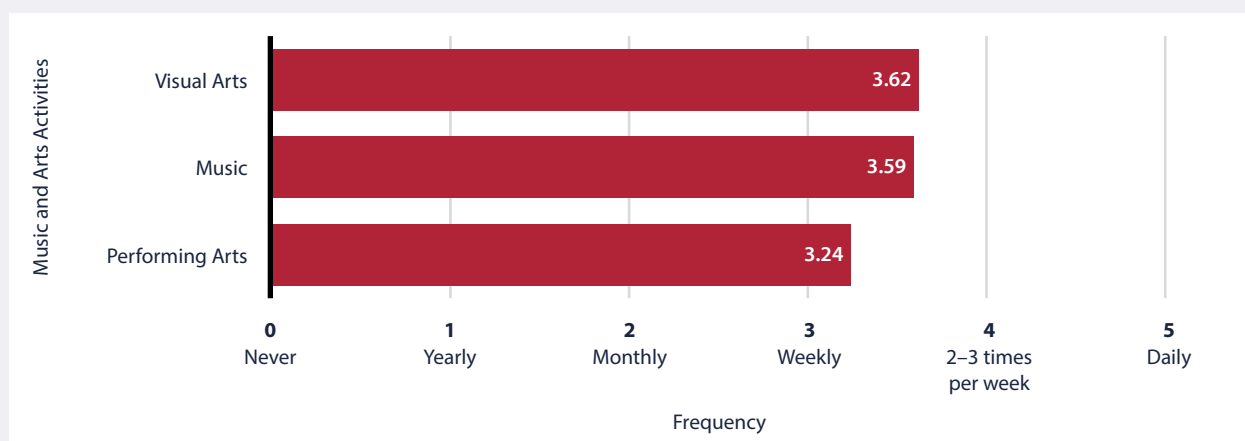


Figure 7 displays the reported average frequency of music, visual arts, and performing arts activities as reported by educators. The frequency is measured on a scale ranging from “Never” (0) to “Daily” (5).

Playfulness and humor

Many schools in our study embraced **playful practices** at school, incorporating activities ranging from **puppet shows**, to **storytelling**, to **stand-up comedy** sessions. Research suggests that encouraging play in schools can positively impact physical and mental health, strengthen social bonds, and build character skills like motivation

and perseverance⁴⁶. Likewise, while still an emerging area of research, using humor in schools has been associated with improved resilience, emotional wellbeing, memory of curricular content, and even exam performance⁴⁷.

In our collaborative research program, educators shared diverse ways that their schools have **incorporated playful and humorous initiatives to facilitate student learning**, from **humorous means of teaching** to encouraging **student performances**. An educator from India shared how playful practices are incorporated



into classroom teaching: *“Incorporating puppet shows and interactive storytelling sessions can be a playful way to introduce educational concepts. We use funny voices, props, and animated expressions to captivate young learners while delivering key messages.”* At one school in Vietnam, teachers dedicate the last Friday of the month to an initiative called “Fun Friday,” where teachers plan engaging activities for their classes, including trivia contests, classroom games, and comedy skits related to the curriculum. A teacher from that school views this playful tradition as supporting both wellbeing and academic learning: *“By infusing playfulness and humor into school life, we strive to cultivate a positive and joyful environment that fosters both academic excellence and emotional wellbeing.”* Research suggests that **playful learning approaches** like these can nurture creativity, curiosity, and social-emotional skills that enhance academic growth while fostering engagement⁴⁸.

46 Bodrova et al., 2013; Pinchover, 2017; Proyer et al., 2018; Hewes, 2014; Ginsburg, 2007; Farley et al., 2021

47 Cameron et al., 2010; Coronel et al., 2021; Swanson, 2013

48 Harvard Graduate School of Education, Project Zero, 2024

In addition to supporting academic growth and emotional wellbeing, playful and humorous initiatives represent an opportunity to **strengthen relationships at school**⁴⁹. In our study, educators around the world discussed how initiatives incorporating playfulness and humor support wellbeing by nurturing positive relationships at their schools. Evidence backs up this perspective, as playful and humorous activities have been shown to improve **teacher-student rapport** and help students develop closer relationships with one another⁵⁰. Several schools in our research reported that **spirit weeks or dress-up days with humorous and playful themes** were popular among students and staff alike and supported **self-expression** and **social bonding**. As one teacher from Ghana reflected, their spirit weeks nurture *“a sense of camaraderie and excitement among students and staff,”* while another educator from the UAE shared, *“Whether it’s a costume day, spirit week, or themed celebrations, it provides an opportunity for students and staff to showcase their creativity and sense of humor.”*

Many educators worldwide are embracing playfulness and humor in schools, contributing to more dynamic and emotionally rich **school cultures**. Integrating playfulness and humor into school life — from humorous classroom activities to playful events like spirit weeks — can strengthen social bonds, support emotional regulation, promote creative expression, and support learning, which all contribute to student wellbeing⁵¹.

Initiatives that support connections with families

Families greatly impact students’ wellbeing at school and academic success⁵². In fact, research shows that quality time with family is more predictive of student wellbeing than many other factors, including household income, across a range of socioeconomically and culturally diverse countries⁵³. Recognizing the central role of families, participating schools around the world have adopted policies and practices to foster meaningful partnerships with families. Results from our global survey show that 97% of educators report that their schools support parental involvement to varying degrees, with 66% indicating that they support parenting involvement “a good amount” or “very much.” Schools are fostering parent and caregiver involvement through a variety of initiatives, such as **parent-led events**, **PTA** participation, or **parenting workshops**.

Communication with caregivers about student wellbeing is a key element of these efforts. Among respondents, over half reported that their schools facilitate such communication daily, weekly, or monthly. Educators emphasized proactive

49 Anderson, 2011; Ntoulia, 2023

50 Cameron et al., 2010

51 Cameron et al., 2010; Proyer et al., 2018

52 Chu et al., 2010; Gilman & Huebner, 2006; Goswami, 2012; Gutman & Vorhaus, 2012; Marshall, 2004; Lawler et al., 2016; Newland et al., 2015

53 Lee and Yoo, 2015

communication strategies as essential for caregiver engagement, with many leveraging digital tools like WhatsApp, Seesaw, Class Dojo, and Toddle to enable regular updates. However, educators also emphasized that meaningful connections extend beyond digital platforms. A Danish educator shared, *“We prioritize daily drop-off and pick-up conversations, progress reports every two months, and parent-teacher conferences twice a year to ensure strong home-school collaboration.”*

Other schools **involve parents directly in students’ learning** at school. A Saudi Arabian educator noted, *“Teachers send unit overviews before starting new units and meet with parents multiple times during the year to discuss academic, social, and emotional progress.”* One Belgian school reported, *“We hold **open classrooms** so that parents can really be a part of the students’ learning,”* designated times when parents are invited into the classroom to observe lessons, interact with students, and participate in activities, fostering transparency and collaboration between school and home. One Swedish educator describes a particularly hands-on family engagement initiative: *“Parents can come in and play with their children in the classroom, called ‘play dates.’ This has given the parents an opportunity to see what happens in our classroom and has strengthened the home and school connection for students, parents, and teachers.”*

These practices align with a long-standing body of research affirming that parental engagement in school can support a wide variety of positive outcomes, including increased motivation, higher academic achievement, and improved social skills, across age and socioeconomic groups⁵⁴.

Some schools go further by **equipping parents and caregivers with knowledge and tools to support their children’s learning and wellbeing at home**. Supporting parents and caregivers with parenting can greatly promote students’ wellbeing as studies across countries show that a supportive, authoritative parenting approach is associated with happiness, life satisfaction, mental health and overall wellbeing⁵⁵. One school in Costa Rica reported hosting **parenting workshops** several times a year that engage parents and caregivers with topics such as **evidence-based parenting practices**, brain development, and effective communication. Similarly, a German educator shared that they host *“Parent Partnership mornings every Thursday. Topics include parenting, English language learning, and how to interpret assessment results. This helps parents understand how and why we teach students a certain way.”* Parenting workshops offered by schools have been shown to play a positive role in supporting parents and caregivers’ confidence and parenting skills and have been associated with positive social-emotional and academic outcomes in students⁵⁶.

The responses from educators in our global survey highlight the varied and thoughtful approaches schools take to engage families in supporting student wellbeing. From regular communication with families, to inviting parents and caregivers into the classroom, to offering parenting workshops, these strategies reflect

54 Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Dotterer & Wehrspann, 2016

55 Kocayörük et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2018; Newland et al., 2019; Putnick et al., 2015; Ulferts, 2020

56 Mendez & LaForett, 2010; Sheridan & Wheeler, 2010

the recognition of parent and caregivers' central role in supporting student wellbeing. Beyond the immediate family, schools are also extending their efforts to build connections with the broader community, recognizing the importance for student wellbeing.

Initiatives that support connections with the broader community, including service learning

Child and adolescent development unfolds within a complex network of relationships, influenced by various layers of a young person's environment⁵⁷. Along with school and family, the community life of youth is a significant predictor of wellbeing⁵⁸. While the influence of the **broader community** on student wellbeing is an emerging area of research⁵⁹, findings from our collaborative action research highlight the importance educators place on fostering community connections to support students' holistic development and long-term wellbeing.

The schools in our action research program **engaged with the broader community** in a variety of ways. For example, in our survey, educators reported that **mentorship programs** and **guest speaker initiatives** connect students with different people and perspectives. One educator in Belgium highlighted, *"We have strong connections between the school and local community, supported through guest speakers weekly in our community time, extracurricular activities, and visits to local industries and educational bodies."* Similarly, other educators reflected on leveraging a mix of **place-specific knowledge, community meetings, field trips, and special guests** to strengthen community ties and offer students opportunities to connect beyond the school community. One Armenian educator explained:

"We use local resources and case studies in classroom teaching to promote a healthy connection between the school and the community. From time to time, this is discussed in our wider school community meetings to share the best practices. For example, economics students visit the central bank, ESS students visit natural resources, music students visit concerts, and art students collaborate with local art festivals. We also bring experts in different fields to school for programs."

Additionally, many schools reported **connecting students with local and global issues** through assemblies and initiatives aligned with global challenges like sustainability.

In considering connection with the broader community, most schools in our research program discussed the benefits of engaging students in **service learning**. As indicated in Figure 8, the schools in our research, on average, engaged students in service learning almost weekly. Research suggests that school-based service learning

57 Bronfenbrenner, 1979

58 Lee & Yoo 2015

59 Goldfeld et al., 2018

Figure 8. Reported average frequency of initiatives to support broader community involvement

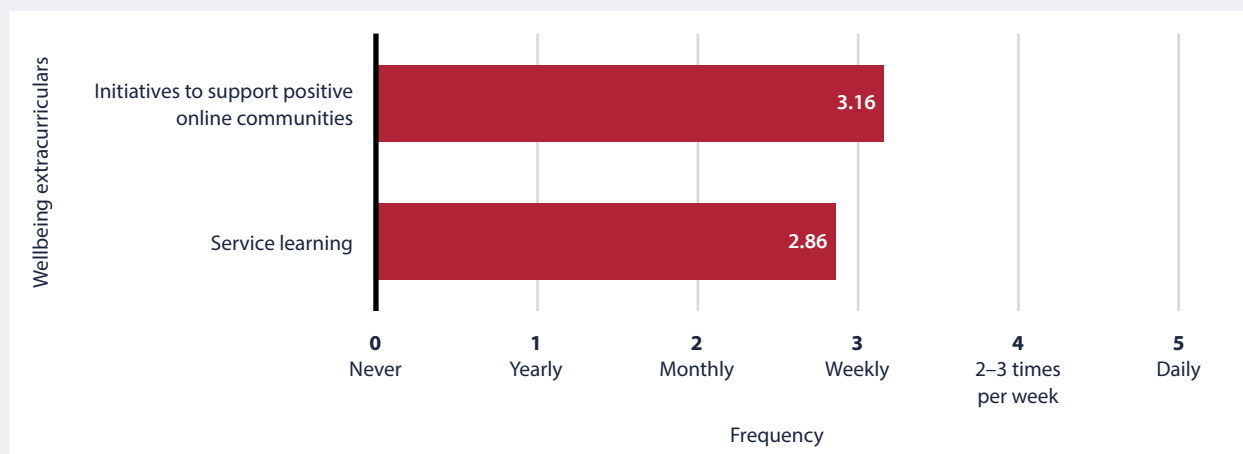


Figure 8 displays the average frequency of two types of initiatives aimed at supporting broader community involvement: service learning and initiatives to support positive online communities. The y-axis represents the two categories of wellbeing extracurriculars, while the x-axis indicates the frequency of implementation, ranging from “Never” (0) to “Daily” (5).

and volunteering programs can greatly benefit students’ wellbeing, enhancing social skills, boosting academic performance, and fostering positive attitudes toward school and learning⁶⁰. Our survey findings revealed that many educators view service learning as a way for students to actively contribute to their communities, fostering a sense of responsibility and deeper connections that enhance community ties and student wellbeing.

In our collaborative action research, educators around the world discussed the value of the IB’s **Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS)** activities. Educators described the CAS program as offering students opportunities for self-determination and collaboration in community service settings, reinforcing their connection to others while developing empathy and responsibility. As one educator in China reflected:

“Our CAS and Service and Learning program aims to build connections with the community. We have just come out of three years of COVID-19, with rigorous policies in China. It was difficult for outside members of the community to enter our campus. So now we are picking up from where we left off.”

Prior studies have indicated that participation in service-learning activities in initiatives like CAS has increased students’ open-mindedness and reflectiveness⁶¹, reinforcing student wellbeing alongside community wellbeing.

60 Billig, 2000; O’Donnell, 1999; Celio et al., 2011

61 Taylor et al., 2022

Global connections through service learning expand these benefits, offering students opportunities to develop cultural awareness, empathy, appreciation of cultural diversity and a sense of global citizenship⁶². In our collaborative research, many schools shared examples of programs that connect students with peers internationally, with positive effects on students' sense of meaning and purpose, relationships, and cultural awareness. For example, one educator in Italy explained: *"Students participate in joint events with other high schools, including international activities such as the Model United Nations, forensics competitions, and cultural festivals. These events offer opportunities for students to engage with peers from diverse backgrounds."* Another school in Vietnam leverages programs like "Global Classroom Connections" and "Global Read Aloud" where students collaborate online with students abroad, furthering their understanding of global issues, and building empathy. Service learning offers a powerful way to foster meaningful ties between students and their communities, supporting a sense of belonging as well as wellbeing⁶³.

Educators in our study emphasized that service learning also enables students to **apply academic knowledge to real-world challenges**, which research suggests is associated with more positive attitudes toward learning and academic gains⁶⁴. For instance, one educator in the United Arab Emirates recounted, *"Our students partner with local museums, blending educational content with practical career exploration, helping students see the value of their education in real-world contexts."* Another educator from a school in Thailand indicated that this can also support social-emotional skills: *"We provide opportunities for students to apply classroom knowledge to real-world challenges, supporting local and global communities. Through participation in community projects, our students develop empathy, leadership skills, and a sense of social responsibility."*

Best practices in service learning include aligning service learning programs with the school curriculum, fostering student voice and choice, facilitating long-term community involvement, and incorporating reflection⁶⁵. As one educator from a school in the United States emphasized, the service learning process should be *"paired with a deep reflective process where students think critically upon their experiences."* Research further suggests that if reflection activities encourage students to analyze social issues or engage in social action related to their service-learning experiences, they are more likely to gain a better understanding of the context behind community needs and the factors contributing to these issues⁶⁶.

Taken together, results from our study suggest that partnering schools globally encourage community connections, especially service learning, as a powerful way to support student wellbeing. These experiences offer students opportunities to learn while making meaningful contributions to their communities.

62 Billig, 2000; Hinton et al., 2024

63 Billig, 2000

64 Celio et al., 2011

65 Celio et al., 2011

66 Billig, 2000



Connecting with nature

Research suggests that **nature-based learning**, or **outdoor education**, can promote student learning and wellbeing, offering boosts in attention, concentration, and cognition while also easing anxiety and depressive symptoms⁶⁷. Studies in neuroscience and psychology further indicate that time spent in nature can have restorative effects, such as reducing mental rumination and resetting our thoughts⁶⁸. In our collaborative action research program, schools showcased a variety of nature programs spanning from primary through secondary school.

Many educators discussed initiatives that draw on nature to **create calming, supportive environments** that aim to bolster the **mental health** and overall **wellbeing** of their young learners. For example, a school in the UAE designed a Serenity Garden, equipped with comfortable seating and games, to provide students with a tranquil place to relax and connect with nature and each other between classes. Another school in Saudi Arabia reported prioritizing creating **accessible green spaces on campus** for students. Research supports this approach, with one experimental study, for example, finding that students in classrooms with views of greenery performed better on concentration tests and experienced systematic decreases in heart rate and stress levels compared to those in classrooms surrounded by “built” environments⁶⁹.

67 Ulrich, et al., 1991; Berman, et al., 2012; Kaplan & Berman 2010

68 Berman et al., 2014; Bratman et al., 2015; Kaplan, 1995

69 Li & Sullivan, 2016

Outdoor learning also provides rich opportunities for students to learn **social-emotional skills** that contribute to wellbeing, such as perseverance, problem-solving, critical thinking, leadership, teamwork, and resilience⁷⁰. The educators in our collaborative research project often discussed links between **outdoor education programs** and the development of character skills. For example, a school in Norway conducts weekly **outdoor learning sessions** for younger students and an annual cabin **trip** for older ones, and educators reported that these programs not only connect students with nature, but also engage them in team-based activities like navigating terrain and cooking meals, which may enhance social-emotional competencies. One school in the United States introduced Outride's Riding for Focus Program to all Middle Years students, beginning on school grounds and building up to national park trails. This daily cycling program has been associated with improvements in social-emotional skills, physical health, and wellbeing⁷¹.

Beyond rich social-emotional benefits, studies suggest that nature-based instruction can also have **positive outcomes on learning** across diverse student demographics, academic disciplines, teaching methods, and educational settings⁷². One educator from a school in Thailand reflects: *"The Outdoor Education Programme supports the connection between academics and our environment. Students starting in early years do weekly activities in national parks, etc., which allow them to find meaning in what they learn in the classroom."*

Nature-based learning opportunities have also been linked with **improved nutritional knowledge and scientific understanding**. Research indicates that school gardens, for instance, significantly boost nutritional knowledge, scientific literacy, and a preference for vegetables⁷³. One educator in Japan described their school's rich co-curricular activities connected to their student garden space:

"Our after-school gardening club allows children to be involved in all aspects from planting, weeding and 'Bug Patrol'...Another group takes part in 'Harvest Club' and facilitates a mini farmers market to sell produce back to the community. These co-curricular practices extend learning beyond the classroom, and allow children to lead and share their learning with the school community."

Similarly, a school in the United States further explores the link between gardening and nutrition with students: *"We have expanded the garden and serve snacks from garden to table, considering initiatives to encourage consuming more fruits and veggies."* Such initiatives promote knowledge of nature, nutrition, and healthy routines, contributing richly to student wellbeing.

70 Kuo et al., 2019

71 Dementyev et al., 2023

72 Kuo et al., 2019

73 Wells et al., 2014; Van den Berg et al., 2020

In a world facing immense environmental threats such as biodiversity loss, changing temperatures, and pollution⁷⁴, connecting with nature in schools is a key way to **cultivate the environmental stewards** of today and tomorrow, which is essential for the flourishing of individuals, communities, and our planet. In fact, adults who report a deep commitment to and care for nature often credit their connection to childhood experiences spent in nature, especially during play, an assertion supported by a wide range of studies⁷⁵. In our collaborative research, many educators emphasized the transformative impact of **young learners engaging with nature to ignite both a passion for and a sense of responsibility towards the planet**. For example, one teacher at a school in Germany noted that a project focused on creating bee homes cultivated a deep environmental consciousness in students. Similarly, a teacher in Denmark shared that their Sharing the Planet unit of inquiry allowed students to cultivate environmental care by understanding the inextricable linkages between their actions and how they impact others and all living things.

From **wilderness outdoor education adventures** to accessible greenspaces on campus, a growing evidence base points to the positive impact of nature-based initiatives on the wellbeing of young people⁷⁶. Educational approaches that support students' connection and communion with nature provide an economical means to promote wellbeing while offsetting some of the stresses associated with growing up in an ever-increasingly urbanized and digitally-dependent society⁷⁷.

74 UNEP, 2024

75 Chawla & Derr, 2012

76 Tillman et al., 2018

77 Hinton et al., 2024

Conclusion

This collaborative action research program led by Research Schools International (RSI), which was supported by the Jacobs Foundation, and carried out in collaboration with the International Baccalaureate (IB) and the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard, has provided great insights into promising practices and policies schools all around the world are implementing in an effort to support wellbeing. From initiatives that target relationships, the development of character, physical and mental health, and exploration of the arts and play in schools to those that extend beyond the school walls to nurture connections with families, the broader community, and our natural environment, results show that schools are consciously striving to cultivate wellbeing globally. This collaborative action research program has also fostered connections among researchers and educators from all corners of the globe who are passionate about supporting wellbeing in schools. To continue to usher this work ahead, we need further collaborations among researchers and practitioners to carry out research in schools with direct practical relevance and to use research findings to inform practice⁷⁸.

As we continue with this movement to support student wellbeing in schools, let us keep in mind that students' wellbeing is inextricably entwined with the larger communities and natural environment in which students live⁷⁹. Education that aims to support student wellbeing might therefore set its sights on education for flourishing, which aims to support student wellbeing in equitable and sustainable ways that also promote the interdependent flourishing of our global community and our shared planet.

The research team from Research Schools International (RSI) and The Human Flourishing Program at Harvard seeks to continue to collaborate with schools around the world to promote wellbeing. You can learn more about our work here: www.researchschoolsinternational.org and hfh.fas.harvard.edu. If your school is interested in learning about opportunities to collaborate with us, please fill in this brief form: https://harvard.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_7R3hXEPksu5Wd1A.

78 Dewey, 1896; Hinton & Fischer, 2008; Hinton et al., 2008

79 VanderWeele and Hinton, 2024

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