

# Whole School Approach to Wellbeing in Childhood and Adolescence

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With special thanks to Dr. Magdalena Balica, Dr. Jennifer Merriman, Dr. Jose Marquez, and the Wellbeing Research Centre team at the University of Oxford.

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Research from the Centre has been published in leading academic journals such as *Management Science*, *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, and *Psychological Science*. The Centre is one of four institutions responsible for delivering the United Nations (UN) World Happiness Report each year.



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# Executive Summary

**Whole School Approach interventions aim to make a profound and lasting impact on the school environment.**

This report delves into the concept of the Whole School Approach as a dynamic strategy to enhance wellbeing at (and beyond) school.

We aim to provide an overview of the current state of knowledge on Whole School Approaches, covering common themes in Whole School Approach research, their impact on wellbeing, plus factors contributing

to their effectiveness, and challenges during implementation.

The ultimate goal of this and our other mini reports is to serve as a digital, evidence-based repository for schools, aiding in the measurement, monitoring, and support of the wellbeing of young people.

## The Current Evidence for a Whole School Approach

We review current research on the Whole School Approach, examining its applications and effectiveness. This report reveals research on Whole School Approaches focusing on outcomes such as:

- Risky behaviour
- Social and emotional learning
- Physical and mental health
- Teacher and staff wellbeing

We also examine multiple Whole School Approach interventions, and their outcomes to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding.

The report also highlights key elements critical for successful Whole School Approach outcomes, including:

- School climate and ethos
- Family and community involvement
- Participatory involvement
- Interventions duration
- Incorporating targeted interventions
- Policy considerations

Finally, we explore mixed results across age, gender, and socio-economic status within Whole School Approach research, and identify some common barriers to such interventions in the school context.

## A Promising Tool for Improving Wellbeing

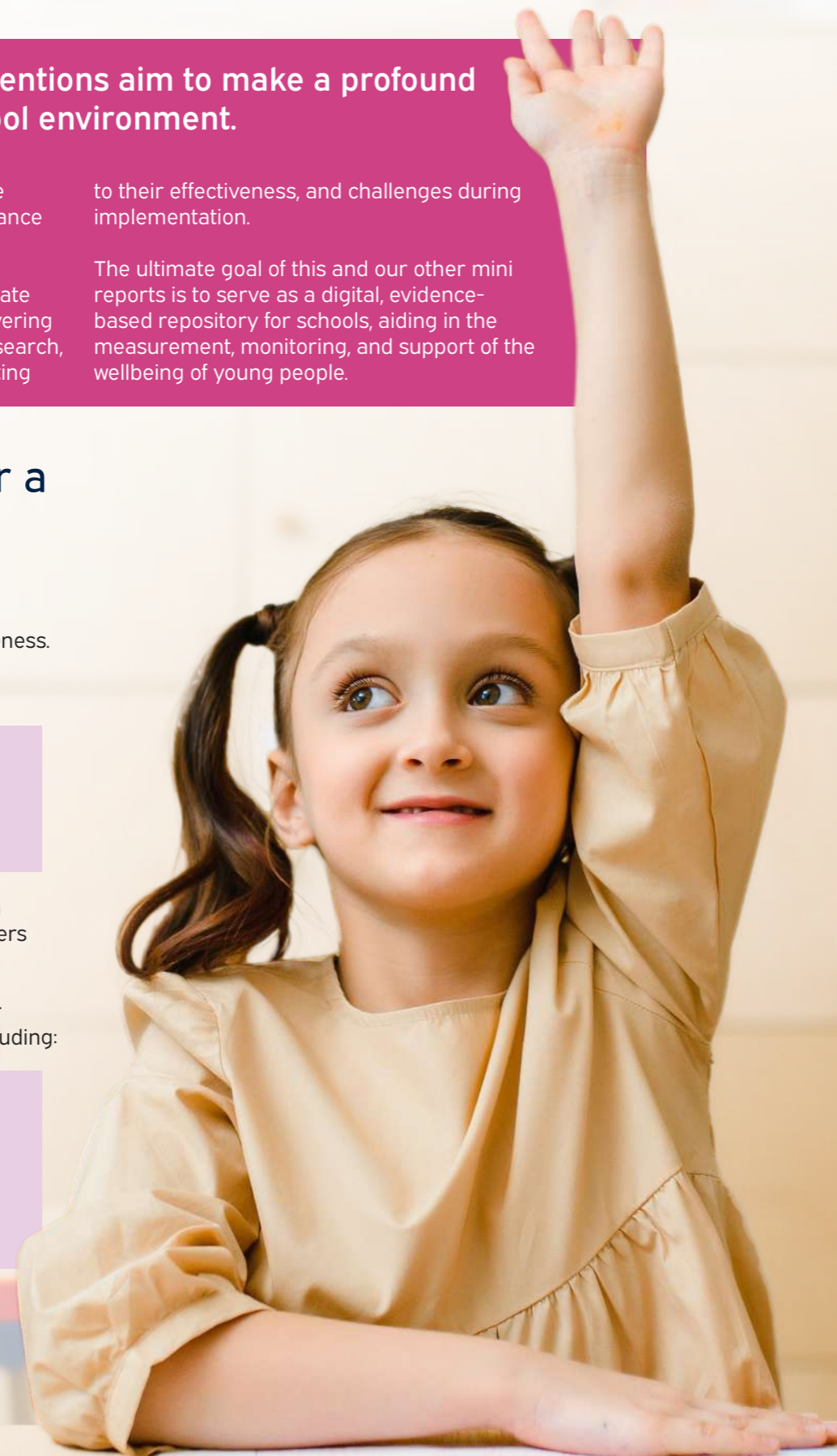
In conclusion, this report encapsulates the potential of the Whole School Approach, emphasising **its promise in fostering a supportive and inclusive environment involving the entire school community.**

Success hinges on effective implementation, stakeholder commitment, adequate resources, and a nuanced understanding of the diverse needs of the school community.

By acknowledging diverse backgrounds, needs, and aspirations, schools play a pivotal role in fostering wellbeing in their context.

**Therefore, schools – leveraging this first-hand knowledge and understanding of their student populations – are active architects of their students' wellbeing journeys.**

And, in recognising that **no two schools' needs are the same**, we underscore the critical role which schools have to play in using evidence-based interventions to inform policies and practices.



# Introduction

The International Baccalaureate Organization and the Wellbeing Research Centre at the University of Oxford have worked together on a series of reports focused on wellbeing in schools.

We suggest readers first explore the foundational reports, ‘Wellbeing in Education in Childhood and Adolescence’ and ‘Wellbeing for Schoolteachers’ before reading this series of reports on wellbeing interventions.

In schools, wellbeing is often used as a catch-all term for anything that sits outside of academic attainment. This makes it difficult for schools to measure and implement changes, because the parameters are so broad and intangible.

Wellbeing science is an established area of academic research, and we employ insights from the empirical science of wellbeing to inform these reports.

In our published reports exploring the wellbeing of young people and schoolteachers, **we focus on subjective wellbeing, which refers to an individual’s perception of their own wellbeing.**

In school settings, wellbeing is often misunderstood as simply the opposite of mental ill health or happiness.

However, in the ‘Wellbeing in Education in Childhood and Adolescence’ report, we clarify the differences between these concepts and how schools can use these definitions to decide which aspects of wellbeing to measure and impact.

The core outcome of the wellbeing framework for young people for this project is satisfaction with school life. We focus on the life satisfaction area of subjective wellbeing as the key outcome for the framework for practical reasons, but we also emphasise the importance of affect and eudaimonia.

These outcomes were selected as they represent the areas that schools can most influence: the framework is presented in Figure 2.

The framework has the key performance indicator or outcome variable in the centre, and all the drivers that research evidence has suggested influence this outcome surrounding it.

It is important to note that **this framework only focuses on the evidence for wellbeing** and, as such, there may

be other research that schools may wish to consider, beyond the scope of these reports, which focus on other positive outcomes for young people.

**Each driver has varying degrees of influence on the wellbeing of individuals** depending on factors such as the age of the individual and their environment. For example, we know that peers are very important to the wellbeing of adolescents, but to a lesser extent for younger children. This framework gives ultimate flexibility and can be adapted over time to incorporate new insights.

In both reports we give examples of definitions that schools can use. For young people, we suggest that a school-specific definition, including all three areas, is most appropriate:

## This school promotes the wellbeing of all pupils.

We define wellbeing as our pupils being satisfied with their school lives, having positive experiences at, and feelings about, school, and believing that what they do at school gives them some purpose and meaning.

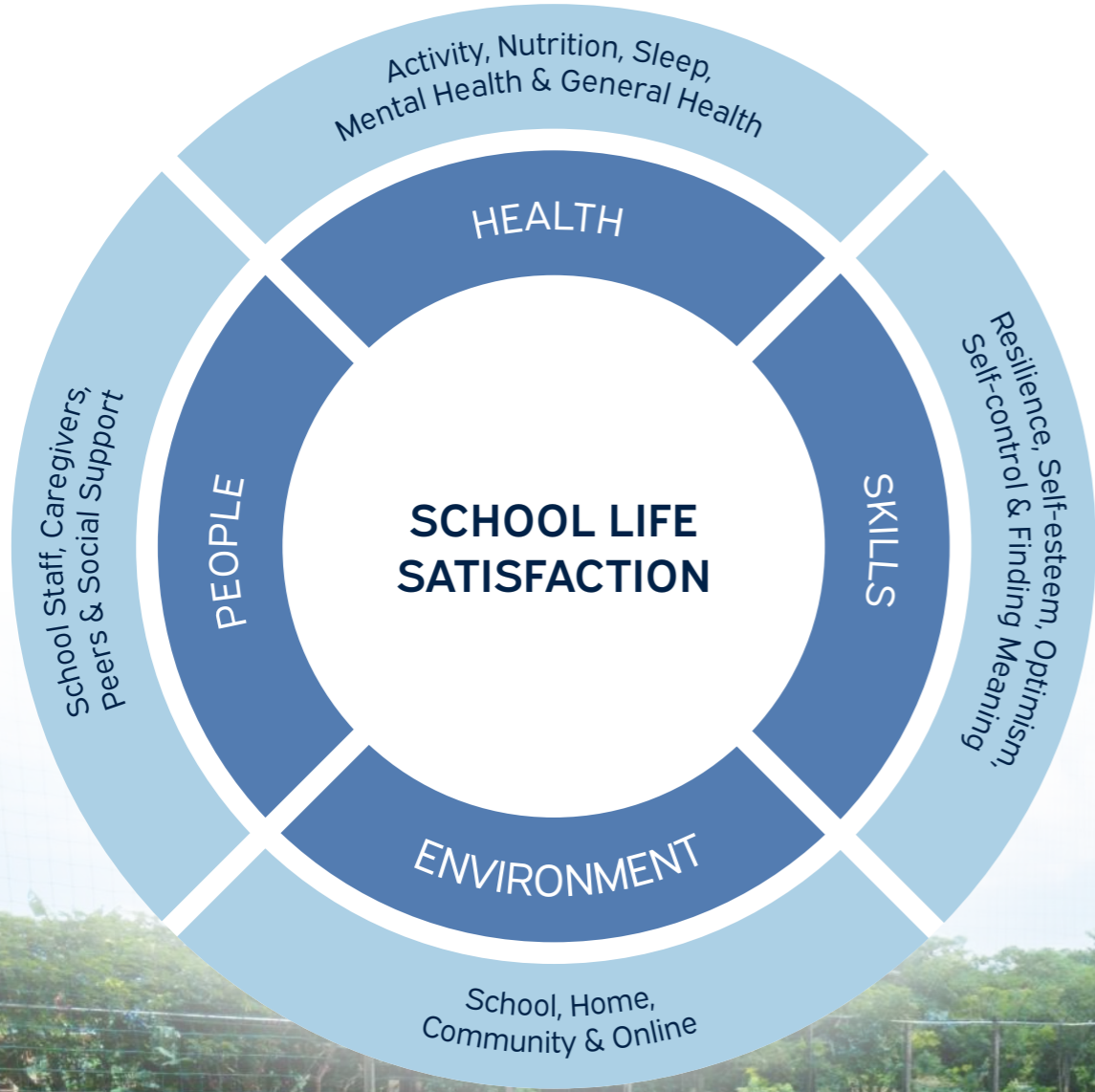
(Edited extract from the ‘Wellbeing in Schools in Childhood and Adolescence’ Report; Taylor et al., 2022)

FIGURE 1: COMPONENTS OF WELLBEING

LIFE SATISFACTION	This element captures young people’s satisfaction with their lives, their perception, and experience.
AFFECT	The feelings, emotions, and states of a young person at a particular timepoint, including both positive affect (e.g., joy, happiness, pride) and negative affect (e.g., sadness, depression, anxiety).
EUDAIMONIA	Whether young people feel their life is worthwhile or has purpose and meaning (this can include autonomy, capabilities, competencies, and other areas of psychological functioning).

Critically, the definitions we recommend in the report remove the drivers of wellbeing (like resilience, mental health, family, peers, teachers, etc.) and focus on **the three key areas of subjective wellbeing: life satisfaction; affect; and eudaimonia.** These are presented in Figure 1.

FIGURE 2: THE SCHOOL LIFE SATISFACTION FRAMEWORK



## Context of Framework

Each school is a unique ecosystem. This Pupil Wellbeing Framework has been specially designed to be flexible and adjustable to the unique context of any given school.

The framework is **evidence-based** and includes factors that affect students' wellbeing in four categories: **health, people, environment, and skills**. There are currently 18 drivers listed within these four categories, but **these will likely expand over time as more research is conducted by scientists globally**. The drivers were identified from a literature review of all the factors that can drive positive or negative changes in wellbeing for young people aged 5-18 with a particular focus on wellbeing at school.

The drivers listed will have different levels of impact on pupils depending on their age and stage, individual differences, and environmental factors that surround them, both inside and outside school.

An essential feature of this framework lies in its ability to allow schools to concentrate on a specific driver of wellbeing. Within the pupil wellbeing report we recommend a **bottom-up process of listening to**

**pupil and staff voice to determine which drivers are important** in individual schools.

This empowers schools to address specific domains according to their particular needs and available resources. Such an approach not only helps schools avoid feeling overwhelmed but also provides guidance on pathways they can initially explore to enhance wellbeing.

The current framework has a focus on Western cultural influences, because **the majority of the research on this topic has been conducted in Western populations**.

When we consider the diverse cultures across the globe, it becomes apparent that different elements of wellbeing may hold varying degrees of conceptual importance. Moreover, there might be additional elements crucial to specific cultures that are not encompassed within the existing definition.

As the research expands in this area of pupil wellbeing in other cultural contexts, the findings can be incorporated into the model to give a more globally holistic approach.



# Purpose and Scope of the Focused Report

This series of mini reports is intended to provide a more nuanced understanding of wellbeing interventions for young people. Each report contains scientific research, interventions, measurement, and discussion around a specific driver of wellbeing.

Each of the topics within these reports has differing levels of scientific evidence, and one of the main aims of

these reports is to summarise what we currently know about a topic and what further work needs to be done.

Ultimately, we aim for these reports to become part of a digital, evidence-based repository which schools can use to measure, monitor, and support, the wellbeing of young people and those around them.

“Put simply; happier children make better learners.”

### The Importance of Wellbeing Interventions for Children

An in-depth discussion of this topic can be found in the report ‘Wellbeing in Education in Childhood and Adolescence’. There are three important reasons why schools should seek to improve the wellbeing of their pupils, listed here.

The report emphasises that **there is value in using school time, money, and resources to improve pupil wellbeing.**

These improvements will likely not only have immediate benefits for students but will have a driving effect on other positive outcomes (individually, socially, and academically) and have a positive impact on the future lives of young people as they mature into adulthood.

**Crucially, there is seemingly no trade-off to make between wellbeing and academic performance.**

**Put simply; happier children make better learners.**

Schools can feel confident to use time and resources to improve pupil wellbeing in the knowledge that it will likely also lead to improvements in their core business of academic attainment.

1

Childhood and adolescence are important periods in their own right, and **every young person has the right to have a positive experience** in this critical formative period.

2

Higher wellbeing in childhood and adolescence is associated with other benefits for young people, such as **higher attainment, better mental health, and positive pro-social behaviour.**

3

It is important to maximise wellbeing in childhood and adolescence because of the **long-lasting impact** this has on an individual’s future, including their adult levels of wellbeing and job prospects.



# Enhancing Wellbeing with a Whole School Approach

In this mini report, we explore the concept of the **Whole School Approach** as a dynamic and inclusive strategy for enhancing wellbeing within the school environment.

By examining a range of Whole School Approach interventions outlined in existing research, we uncover common themes and the impact that these interventions can have on wellbeing (and its drivers) within schools.

We also consider the factors that contribute to effective Whole School Approach interventions, as well as the challenges that may be faced during implementation, and outline various methods of measuring the effectiveness of such interventions.

**This report underscores the significant role of schools in tailoring interventions to their unique student populations and prioritising development across all drivers of wellbeing.**

A Whole School Approach may be used in conjunction with the individual drivers of wellbeing highlighted in the School Life Satisfaction Framework to create a bespoke intervention within a school that considers all members of the school community, and serves to enhance wellbeing for all.

Image © Katerina Holmes via Pexels

## The Whole School Approach Definition

Within scientific research, interventions are actions which are made within an existing context, to bring about a desired change.

Within educational research, interventions can be broadly separated into three different approaches: **targeted**, **universal**, and **whole school**.

### Targeted Approach

Targeted education interventions are directed towards a specific population within the school community.

Often this approach is used when trying to improve outcomes for an at-risk population.

Within wellbeing research, for example, a targeted intervention might include identity and confidence workshops for students with very low self-esteem.

### Universal Approach

Universal education interventions deliver an intervention to a population regardless of the needs or characteristics of the population.

In the context of wellbeing research, a universal intervention might include mindfulness workshops to be delivered to all pupils within a particular year group.

### Whole School Approach

The Whole School Approach considers more than just the participating individuals in the intervention, and considers the school as a dynamic and complex ecosystem.

A Whole School Approach might consider pupil interventions, teacher interventions, new policies, interactions with parents, or community support.

The Whole School Approach encompasses the idea that for interventions to positively affect student social, emotional, and academic outcomes, the entire school context must be considered.

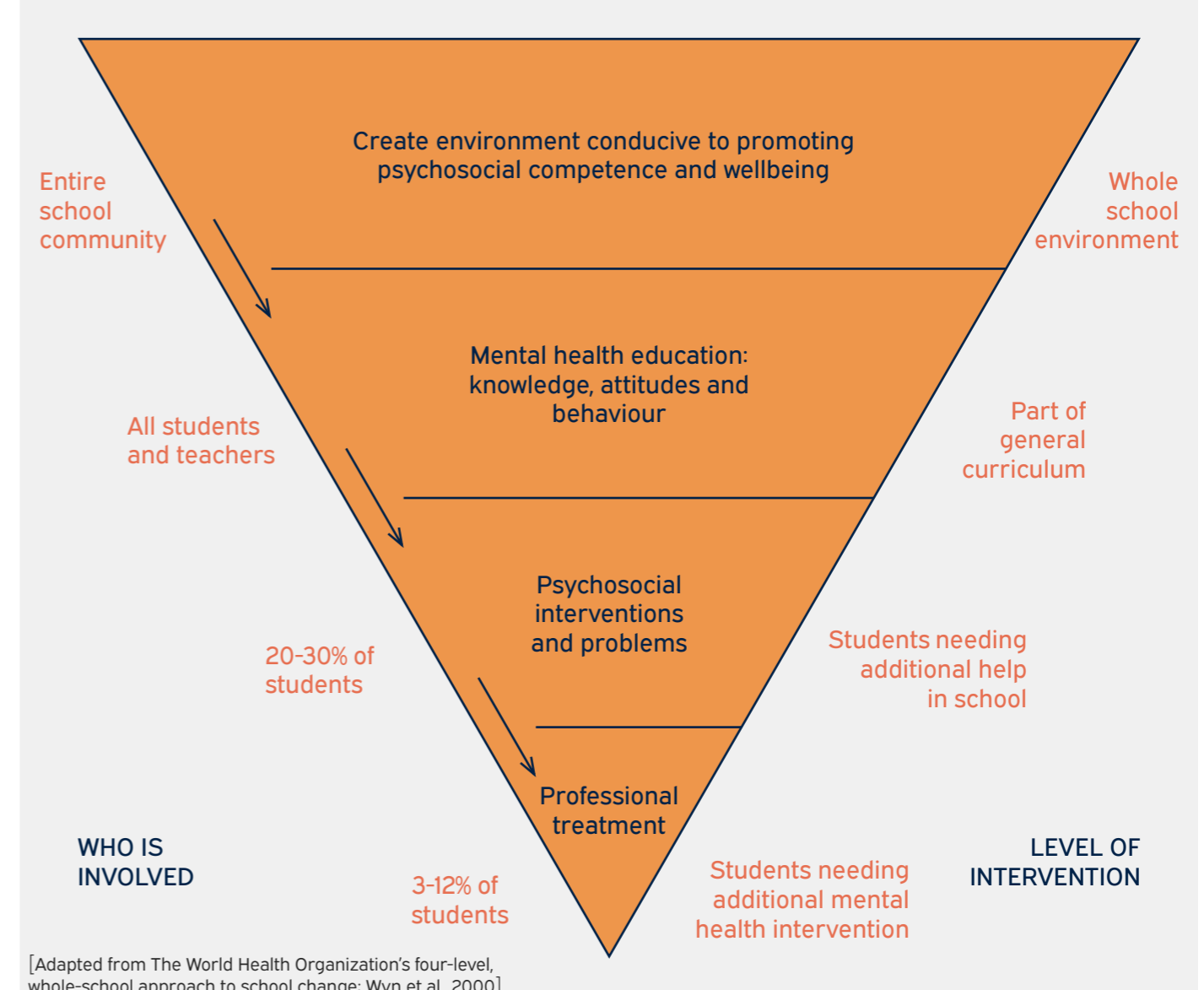
A Whole School Approach incorporates multiple factors within the school context, including:

- Curriculum and teaching
- School culture and ethos, policy and operations
- Physical environment
- Relationships and partnerships within the school
- The larger community in which the school resides

The focus of the Whole School Approach therefore **goes beyond the individual**, focusing instead on addressing organisational and structural frameworks in the hope of **bringing about more extensive, deeper, and longer-lasting impact**.

**“The focus of the Whole School Approach goes beyond the individual.”**

FIGURE 3: WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION'S WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH



## The Whole School Approach in Research

Overall, research shows that, when implemented correctly, **Whole School Approach interventions can be more effective than interventions focusing on a single component of wellbeing.**

Not only have Whole School Approach interventions been found to improve wellbeing outcomes directly – and indirectly – but they have also been found to help improve academic outcomes.

Furthermore, the emphasis of Whole School Approaches on a wider student demographic brings additional advantages, such as helping to reduce stigma around mental health issues and raising awareness of its promotion, with potential lasting effects at a broad level.

## The Whole School Approach in Policy

Many government bodies have actively emphasised and promoted the effective use of Whole School Approaches.

Such interventions, these policy recommendations suggest, should extend beyond learning in the classroom to include wider aspects such as school culture, teaching and learning, partnerships with stakeholders, and the provision of visible senior leadership for emotional health and wellbeing.

An Education Wales report emphasises the need to:

“address the emotional and mental wellbeing needs of **all** children and young people, as well as school staff, as part of the whole-school community”

(Edited extract from ‘Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing’; Education Wales, 2021; emphasis in original)

The Whole School Approach has also inspired international education policy and frameworks. The World Health Organization’s Health Promoting Schools framework, for example, actively encourages health using a Whole School Approach with a focus on health and wellbeing.



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# Areas of Focus in Whole School Approaches

Whole School Approaches may be used to target wellbeing more generally, and/or, secondary outcomes related to wellbeing in the school context.

It should be noted that **these wellbeing factors and outcomes are often interconnected** and affect each other leading to some overlap in the existing research literature.

These findings are highlighted in a table of recommended Whole School Approach interventions (see Table 1), based on the following focal research areas:

- Risky Behaviour
- Social and Emotional Learning
- Physical and Mental Health
- Teacher and Staff Wellbeing

## Risky Behaviour

Whole School Approach interventions have been commonly employed with the aim of reducing risky and violent behaviour.

Research shows that experiences of bullying and violence at a young age influence pupils’ wellbeing and health; **further research exploring the use of Whole School Approaches to target bullying have found mostly positive results** in not only reducing instances of bullying, but also increasing confidence to report such behaviour.

**The research suggests a Whole School Approach is particularly effective in cases of bullying** – as compared to singular interventions – due to the large-scale, systemic and complex nature of the issue.

**Other Whole School Approaches have focused on reducing risky behaviours such as substance abuse or dangerous sexual health practices**, often also addressed in relation to violence or bullying. **However, the evidence presented by the research in these cases is more mixed.**

One common theme, though, is that in order for Whole School Approaches to be successful in promoting these more complex outcomes, **such interventions must not only foster a different ethos and culture within schools but also improve engagement with families and communities beyond minimal and tokenistic efforts.**

## Social and Emotional Learning

**Whole School Approach interventions have also been shown to help foster social and emotional skills.** Social emotional learning skills, such as regulating emotion, maintaining good relationships, or being able to handle conflict have all been associated with improvements in wellbeing, health, behaviour, and other positive outcomes.

Analysis of multiple social emotional learning interventions found that **Whole School Approach interventions in particular showed small but significant effects on enhancing social emotional learning skills, behavioural outcomes, and internalising symptoms.**

Other reviews on Whole School Approaches have also highlighted the importance of promoting social emotional learning skills within the curriculum so as to form part of everyday school life, with particular focus placed on implementing these interventions in an active and inclusive manner.

However, due to the complexity of such interventions and further challenges related to measurement, school resources and other factors, **more work in the realm of implementation science is needed to understand how schools can best be supported to effectively integrate Whole School Approaches for improved social emotional learning skills.**

## Physical and Mental Health

Schools are understood to have the potential to profoundly influence the health of young people with research suggesting that the values, ethos, and culture, promoted in schools are critical.

**Whole School Approach interventions have therefore also been conducted with the aim of improving physical health outcomes and behaviours.** While current evidence is dominated by interventions on obesity, a growing body of research has placed a focus on nutrition, physical activity, and a combination of the two.

**One such review found four over-arching themes that emerged across studies focused on a range of different health issues:**

1. Substance use and aggressive behaviour tend to be stronger among pupils who feel educationally marginalized or unsafe and therefore seek a source of status and bonding through these behaviours.
2. Behaviours posing health risks tend to cluster in unsupervised 'hotspots' within the school.
3. Positive relationships with teachers are critical

in limiting risk behaviour. When these are hampered by school organisation or education policy constraints, students turn to health-risk behaviour for a sense of identity and social support.

4. Feelings of dissatisfaction at school can lead students to seek avenues of 'escape', whether by leaving the school premises during lunch or for extended, unauthorised periods or resorting to substance use.

Besides making a case for Whole School Approaches in schools as a way of addressing health outcomes, such studies help to understand the underlying and contextual factors at play, and from there to understand what elements of a school's environment should be targeted if a Whole School Approach is to be successful in improving health outcomes.

**Overall, Whole School Approach interventions focused on physical and mental health promotion have reported favourable impacts for pupils.**

**However, there is still a lack of evidence around outcomes such as sexual health and substance use.**

## Teacher and Staff Wellbeing

**Acknowledgment of the importance of teacher and staff wellbeing has grown considerably**, and this has been explored in greater detail in the companion 'Wellbeing for Schoolteachers' report (Taylor et al., 2023).

**Due to this growing understanding, the scope of Whole School Approach interventions has also expanded.**

Teachers and staff at school can have a large impact on the wellbeing and academic achievement of pupils through teacher behaviours, attitudes, and role-modelling. Research has demonstrated how a supportive community at school (including a sense of belonging, shared purpose and goals, supportive relationships, and meaningful and influential engagement) positively affects the wellbeing of

school staff, which further impacts the wellbeing and academic achievement of pupils.

Whole School Approach interventions have also been found to provide valuable support structures, assisting teachers in fulfilling the learning and communication needs required of them by their professional roles.

**Wellbeing initiatives that received the highest positive feedback were those which integrated into an overall nurturing school culture.**

For a further detailed discussion of the role of teachers and their wellbeing in schools, please see the 'Wellbeing for Schoolteachers' report (Taylor et al., 2023).

## Link to Wellbeing Framework

**Within the school context, the Whole School Approach has been instrumental in addressing critical areas such as risky behaviour, social and emotional learning, physical and mental health, as well as the wellbeing of teachers and staff.**

This evidence can be paired with the Wellbeing Framework presented at the start of this report which highlights the drivers of wellbeing for pupils in schools.

Specifically, social and emotional learning Whole School Approach interventions naturally falls within the drivers of 'skill' and 'people', given that the development of social-emotional skills not only promotes resilience but also nurtures positive social relationships.

Whole School Approaches for risky behaviour, physical, and mental health are inherently linked to the 'health' category, and the Whole School Approaches for improving the wellbeing of teachers and staff is encompassed within the broader 'people' category in the wellbeing framework.

**Given the complex relationships among these categories and their profound influence on students' school wellbeing, it becomes evident that a holistic, Whole School Approach is the most effective path forward.**

To delve further, the following section outlines a compilation of recommended interventions that have thoughtfully embraced the principles of the Whole School Approach.

As we recommend in the 'Wellbeing in Education in Childhood and Adolescence' report (Taylor et al., 2022), it is important that schools incorporate pupil and staff voice into any decisions about which drivers of wellbeing to influence and which Whole School Approaches to select, given that this has been shown to increase the effectiveness of a given intervention.



# Interventions

Findings from a wide range of Whole School Approaches have been condensed into the following table to illustrate examples of interventions with varying levels of effectiveness.

The table provides detail regarding target population, setting, evidence level measures, and outcomes.

In the results section for each intervention, we mainly focus on wellbeing-related outcomes as these are the outcomes of interest for this report.

## Level of Evidence

**Some studies, by their design, deliver stronger or higher quality evidence than others.** When looking at a piece of scientific research, scientists assess several different aspects of a study to ascertain how robust the study is and how much the evidence can be generalised to different populations.

Of course, these levels of evidence must always be considered through the lens of what is possible, ethical, and contextually relevant.

When looking at the strength of a study, firstly the researcher will look at how the study was conducted and make an assessment based on the method that was used. Experimental designs, whether through studies known as systematic reviews, meta-analyses, or Randomised Controlled Trials, are typically graded as delivering the most rigorous types of scientific evidence. They are deemed more rigorous than quasi-experimental studies, observational research, and qualitative research.

**However, all levels of evidence can be useful when considered in context as part of a holistic approach.**

As part of their assessment of the method, scientists will also look at how the data was gathered, how many people took part, the characteristics of the people who took part, whether the findings of the study have been replicated and whether the study measured what it intended to. These elements are crucial in determining the strength and relevance of the evidence.

In this report we highlight some of the strengths and weaknesses of each piece of intervention research. For further information on research methods, we recommend referring to the book *Research Methods in Education* (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 8<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2018).

TABLE 1: EVALUATED WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH INTERVENTIONS

<h3>Health Promoting Schools (HPS) Framework</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Encourages collaboration across the school community, aiming to equip students with strategies to promote and protect their health</li><li>Large study (more than 3,000 student participants, across 32 secondary schools in Australia, aged 12-16)</li><li>Robust evidence level, conducted as a cluster Randomised Control Trial (RCT)</li><li>Wide-reaching strategies designed to address one or more internal or external resilience factors</li><li>At follow-up, there was no significant difference between the HPS intervention group and the control group in multiple measures</li><li>Structure and design of the framework has gone on to be used in numerous successful Whole School Approach interventions</li></ul>	
<h3>The Friendly Schools Intervention</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Draws on multiple existing intervention models in its aims to build students' social competence and relationships to reduce the likelihood of bullying</li><li>Very large study (more than 5,000 student participants, across 50 schools in Australia, aged 8-9 and 13-14)</li><li>Robust evidence level, conducted as a Randomised Control Trial (RCT)</li><li>Wide-reaching intervention design involves school staff, parents, and students</li><li>The intervention was found to significantly reduce the likelihood of being bullied at both one and three years post-intervention</li><li>Students were also more likely to have self-reported incidences of bullying</li><li>In the older age group, the intervention was found to significantly improve victimisation, perpetration, depressive symptoms, anxiety, stress, loneliness, and safety</li></ul>	
<h3>Gatehouse Project</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Builds on existing intervention model to create opportunities for student participation in school life beyond the classroom</li><li>Large study (more than 2,600 student participants, across 26 secondary schools in Australia, aged 13-16)</li><li>Robust evidence level, conducted as a Randomised Control Trial (RCT)</li><li>Strategies include implementing a student curriculum that teaches interpersonal communication and emotional management</li><li>Students were found to be less likely to engage in the following risky behaviours: drinking, tobacco use, and the alcohol and tobacco use of friends</li><li>The intervention did not have a significant effect on depressive symptoms and school relationships</li></ul>	



# KidsMatter

- Builds on existing intervention model to inform a four-part conceptual framework:
  - Positive school community
  - Social and emotional learning for children
  - Parent Support and education
  - Early intervention
- Very large study (more than 11,000 student participants, 5,000 parents/carers and almost 1,200 staff members across 100 schools in Australia)
- Robust evidence level, conducted as a longitudinal study
- Largest effects were observed among teachers, with improvements to: job satisfaction, working relationships with parents and peers, self-efficacy, and knowledge transfer
- Small but measurable child outcome improvements were observed in several areas, including (but not limited to): adult-child relationships, temperament, and mental health

# Hong Kong Healthy Schools Award

- Builds on existing intervention model to promote staff development, parental education, and involvement of the whole school community to improve the health and wellbeing of pupils, parents and staff within the broader community
- Large study (more than 4,300 student participants, across nine schools in Hong Kong, both primary and secondary)
- Structured framework provides guidance for development as well as a system of monitoring and recognition of achievement
- The schools involved with the intervention showed greater improvements (versus non-participating schools) in: academic outcomes, health, dietary behaviours, violence, theft/damage of property, life satisfaction, reported self-harm, and smoking
- Reasonably robust evidence level, conducted using pre- and post-test measurements

# INCLUSIVE (Initiating Change Locally in Bullying and Aggression Through the School Environment)

- Whole-school restorative approach to address bullying and aggression
- Large study (more than 6,600 student participants, across eight secondary schools in the UK, aged 12-13)
- Robust evidence level, conducted as a Randomised Control Trial (RCT)
- The intervention was found to have a small effect size in improving: bullying, quality of life, psychological wellbeing
- Researchers observed a positive influence on other socio-emotional outcomes (such as conduct, hyperactivity, peer relationships, and emotions)
- The intervention was found to reduce the likelihood of antisocial behaviours, pertaining to the use of alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs
- Teacher outcomes including stress, burnout, and quality of life showed no statistically significant change



# KiVa Antibullying Program

- Whole-school programme which incorporates both universal and targeted interventions
- Consists of interactive lessons where students are taught about bullying and how to prevent it, as well as focusing on social skills more generally
- Very large study (more than 8,000 student participants across 74 primary and 73 secondary schools in Finland, aged 7-15)
- Robust evidence level, conducted as a quasi-experimental study and a Randomised Control Trial (RCT)
- The intervention was found to reduce reported bullying/victimisation and peer-reported reinforcing of bullying
- Positive effects were observed to be stronger within the primary schools than the secondary schools

# Olweus Prevention Programme Against Bullying

- Aimed primarily to reduce existing bullying problems among students at school, prevent the development of new bullying problems, and more generally, achieve better peer relations at school
- Very large study (approximately 21,000 student participants in Norway, aged 11-14)
- Reasonably robust evidence level, conducted as a quasi-experimental study
- Results found that at post-test, there were significant reductions in self-reported bullying/victimisation, and in anti-social behaviour (such as truancy)
- The intervention was found to improve the school climate, with improvements pertaining to: social relationships, attitudes towards school, student discipline, an student school life satisfaction

# Positive Action Programme

- Wide-reaching intervention involves teaching comprehensive skills for successful learning and living, comprising training and materials for schools, families, and communities
- The programme consists of a classroom curriculum, kits for school preparation and teacher training, school-wide climate development, a counsellor's kit, and parent and community involvement manuals
- Large study (more than 2,000 student participants, across both primary and secondary schools in the USA)
- Robust evidence level, conducted as a Randomised Control Trial (RCT)
- The intervention was found to improve self-concept and school performance
- Researchers also observed a reduction in problem behaviours and the need for disciplinary action

# The Child Development Project

- Wide-reaching intervention with classroom, school and family components with an over-arching goal of promoting cooperative learning across the school community
- Very large study (approximately 13,000 student participants in USA)
- Robust evidence level, conducted as a longitudinal study
- The intervention was found to have mixed effects depending on the school context
- Patterns of improvement were found in measures including (but not limited to): sense of school as a community, enjoyment of school and class, motivation, reading frequency, self-efficacy, autonomy, and social attitudes



# The School Development Project (SDP)

- Wide-reaching framework which involves:
  - Establishment of a school management team involving staff and parents
  - A mental health team to address issues around school ethos and the mental health concerns of individual staff and students
  - A programme to encourage parents to participate as equal partners in planning and decision-making in the school
- Small study (174 student participants in USA)
- Robust evidence level, conducted as a cluster Randomised Control Trial (RCT)
- The intervention was found to lead to significant improvements in behaviour, intellectual/school status, physical outcomes, anxiety, popularity, and happiness and satisfaction

# Aban Aya Youth Project

- Wide-reaching project with school-wide climate, parent, and community components which aim to enhance students' sense of belonging and social support
- Includes setting up of a 'taskforce' of staff, students, parents, and local residents to examine and amend school practices
- Mid-sized study (573 student participants across 12 schools in USA, aged 10-14)
- Robust evidence level, conducted as a cluster Randomised Control Trial (RCT)
- The intervention was found to significantly reduce: violent behaviour, delinquency, provoking behaviour, drug use, and unsafe sexual practices
- The researchers note that these (positive) findings were only found for boys, and significant effects of the intervention were not found among girls



# Elements Towards a More Effective Whole School Approach

Whilst a significant amount of research on Whole School Approaches focuses on their content (the outcomes which are addressed and how), numerous research efforts have also examined which elements of Whole School Approaches work together to produce the greatest effect.

Here, we examine these features in detail in order to understand how a Whole School Approach might be applied for best outcomes.

- School Climate and Ethos
- Family and Community Involvement
- Participatory Involvement
- Intervention Duration
- Incorporating Targeted Interventions
- Policy

## School Climate and Ethos

**A school's overall climate (often articulated and impacted by the school's ethos) is of primary importance for the success of a Whole School Approach.**

Research emphasises the development of a **strong and nurturing school culture as imperative** to implementing effective and sustainable behaviour change and overall pupil wellbeing.

Many researchers go a step further, finding that interventions which address the child's environment beyond the classroom (school, family, and community) are more helpful than those that only focus directly on a child's behaviour.

Other related elements found to be important in the effectiveness of any Whole School Approach include relationships, social inclusion, and community-building.

**It is therefore vital that Whole School Approach interventions aim to create an environment where pupils and staff feel safe, cared for, and part of the community to which they belong.**

## Family and Community Involvement

Related to, but separate from, school climate is the **recognised importance of community and family (mainly parental) involvement in a child's wellbeing.**

The need for supportive parental involvement has been explored in multiple research studies which have highlighted the importance of family in school-based interventions as a way of increasing intervention effectiveness.

In particular, **families are able to reinforce specific messaging at home which can help the delivery of a given intervention** and, in some cases, **can also help to sustain long-term impact among pupils.**

Beyond parental and immediate family involvement alone, the community component of a Whole School Approach has also been highlighted in research, particularly for young people requiring additional mental health support.

The wider community, that which extends beyond the school confines, can play an important role in school-based interventions by reinforcing skills learned at school, enhancing relationships developed in the neighbourhood, providing opportunities for social support and communication, as well as creating links to external resources which may be helpful to students.

On the other hand, research also demonstrates the potentially detrimental effects of challenging community settings on young people's healthy development.

**Overall, for Whole School Approaches to work effectively and sustainably, it is important that the broader school community is involved and committed to positive change.**

All members of the school community – at all levels – need to see themselves as contributors to pupils' wellbeing and must be committed to the Whole School Approach intervention in order for it to effectively produce favourable outcomes.

## Participatory Involvement

Many reviews on the topic of Whole School Approaches encourage taking a child-centred approach, involving pupils ('pupil voice') by eliciting their thoughts and incorporating their suggestions and feedback before implementing interventions.

**The role of pupil voice in intervention work is particularly important given the evidence that young people tend to feel that health promotion interventions, in many cases, fail to take their feelings and opinions into account.**

Similarly, teacher involvement at the design level is also likely to increase buy-in and teacher support at the time of implementation.

Ultimately, considering the voice of students and staff has been found to help with the design, selection, and implementation of interventions, which can then be adjusted to suit the needs of a particular school or cultural context.

**Overall, it is important that a sense of shared ownership, collaboration, and empowerment of the entire school community is felt.**

A Whole School Approach, by its nature, fosters participatory involvement in the actioning of the intervention, and as such, seem to be an effective pathway towards implementing sustainable change within a school.

## Intervention Duration

Many reviews on Whole School Approaches **highlight the need for interventions to take place over a long period of time**, and to be delivered regularly (or to at least have booster/reminder sessions after the main intervention takes place) so as to enable the practice of skills developed throughout the duration of the intervention.

One valuable method through which intervention effects can be made sustainably implemented is through the incorporation of the intervention content into the existing curriculum and everyday school-life to lessen the burden placed on teachers and allow for regular practice of learned skills.

It is also important to note that, due to the complex and multi-component nature of Whole School Approach interventions, **getting these up and running can take over a year to roll out properly.**

Thus, it should be noted that the successful implementation and effectiveness of Whole School Approach interventions requires **adequate planning, resources, and long-term commitment.**



# Incorporating Targeted Interventions

Whilst a Whole School Approach, by its nature, attempts to engage the entire school population (and beyond) in an intervention, some argue that Whole School Approaches which also incorporate **a targeted element may better assist those who need more support.**

However, vital to the success of a sustainable Whole School Approach is that the approach is continuously built upon and developed. Instead, there is a need for continuous monitoring and re-assessment of the implementation to highlight successes and address weaknesses.

Where these weaknesses relate to a specific group or area, a targeted intervention may be effectively incorporated within the Whole School Approach to ensure that no student is left behind.

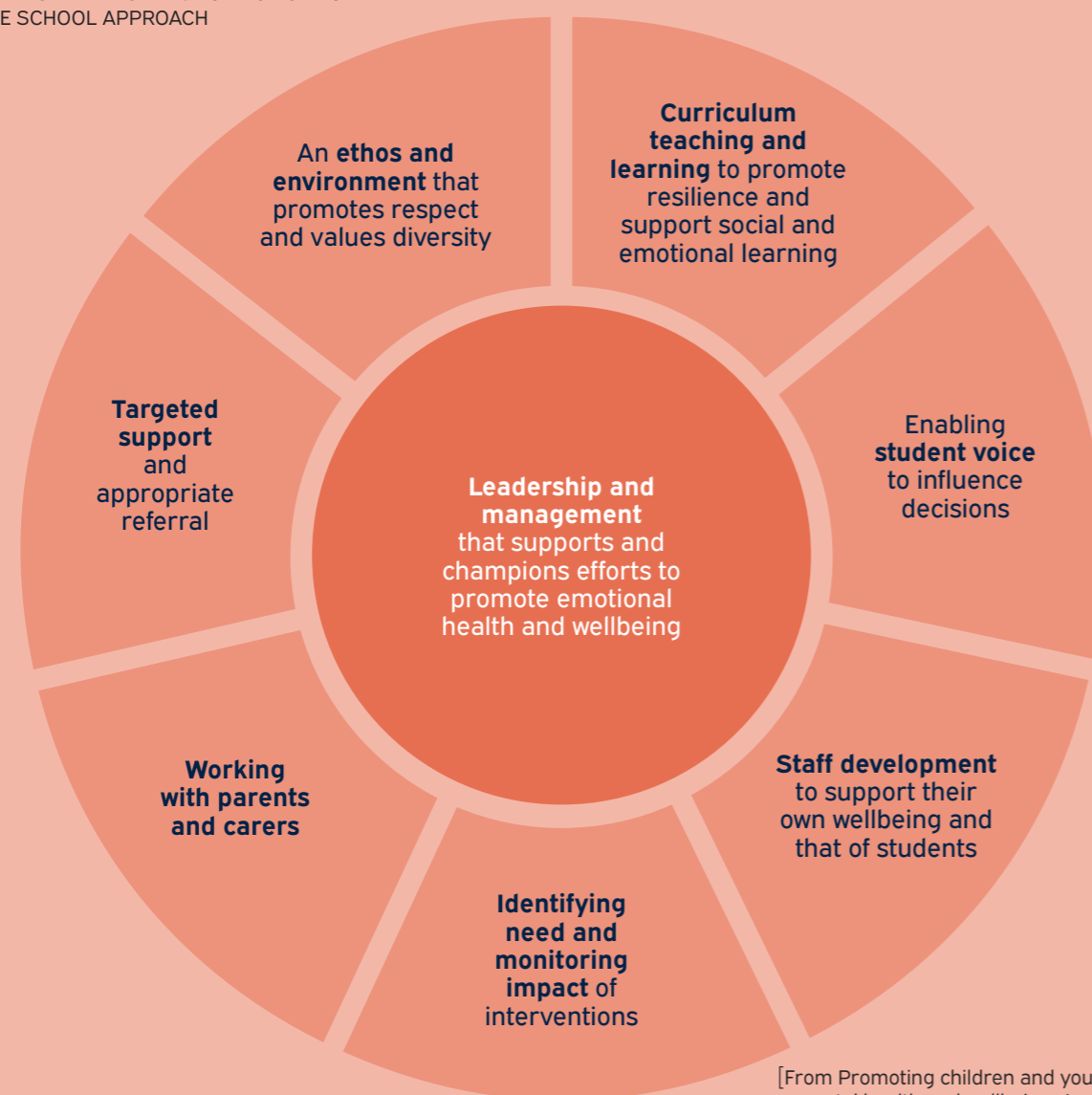
# Policy

Effective Whole School Approach interventions should always align with the existing policies and regulations within a specific school's context. **A school's dedication to a Whole School Approach initiative is greatly reinforced when there are supportive policy structures in place that prioritise student wellbeing.**

These policies, while varying from one context to another, invariably share a common objective: to enhance the overall wellbeing of students and/or staff within the educational system.

One noteworthy example is the guidance provided by Public Health England (2021), in collaboration with the Department for Education, which sets out eight essential principles for fostering a Whole School Approach to mental health and wellbeing (presented in Figure 4).

FIGURE 4: EIGHT PRINCIPLES TO PROMOTING A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH



[From Promoting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing: A whole school or college approach (2021)]



Image © yellowsarah via Canva

# Evidence for Different Populations

Owing to the complexity of Whole School Approaches and the wide array of research topics related to wellbeing, evidence regarding different student subpopulations within schools has produced mixed results. We expand on this complexity in further detail below regarding age, gender, and socio-economic status.

## Age

**Comparing the relative benefits of wellbeing interventions across different age groups and grade levels is complex**, owing to the large variation in intervention approaches, content, and other variables present in different school contexts.

While variability in the results for age groups exists, **overall evidence suggests that interventions which start early in the child's development and continue over an extended period (with booster sessions) and become a part of school culture are most effective.**

## Gender

Similarly, **the relationship between Whole School Approach outcomes and gender is complex** and often involves multiple variables, some of which even outside the control of schools.

**The effects of Whole School Approaches on different genders can vary depending on the focus area of the Whole School Approach**, with greater effects reported for male pupils regarding overt signs of bullying, and better results among female students regarding health outcomes such as substance abuse and poor sexual health.

Since it is apparent that age and gender often interact and can produce differential effects, **further research is required in understanding which types of interventions are better suited for which gender, and at what age.**

## Socio-economic Status

**There is an overall lack of robust Whole School Approach research conducted in low-income settings.**

Whilst research presents some encouraging findings in the ability of Whole School Approach interventions to help address the needs of less advantaged populations, thereby decreasing disparity, **further research is needed to bolster such findings, especially in low-income countries.**

# Barriers to Whole School Approach Implementation

Given the complexity and multi-layered nature of Whole School Approaches, effectively delivering such programmes means working through a variety of challenges in terms of intervention design implementation, and measurement.

This section reviews some of the main barriers to implementing Whole School Approaches that have been frequently addressed in research to date.

### Resources: Time and Money

**One of the primary barriers to Whole School Approach implementation is the lack of resources, both in terms of time and money.**

Planning and carrying out a large-scale intervention across the school, family, and community contexts, can be costly and require an extended period of time and effort from all individuals involved, which can be difficult to achieve.

**One way to address this could be to identify a school health lead, coordinator, or champion whose assignment is to attend only to school health priorities without being distracted by competing priorities.**

Though resources toward school-level wellbeing and mental health have increased along with awareness and concern over the state of ill-health in young people, health-related funding in schools tends to still be a challenge.

To address this challenge, health-related funding needs to be sought at various levels (be it local, municipal, district, state, federal, individual, etc.) as a routine part of each annual educational funding process.

### Participant (Dis)Engagement

The active involvement of all members of the school community and beyond (including especially teachers and staff, as well as families and the local community) has been well-established as a crucial factor for the success of a Whole School Approach.

In reality, however, achieving full participant involvement and engagement can also present challenges and act as a barrier to effective implementation.

**The engagement of all stakeholders, including teachers, families, and the wider school community, within the Whole School Approach is a critical aspect of its successful implementation and outcomes;** this also encourages schools to explore alternative methods for engaging all members in achieving the most favourable effects.

### Leadership and Guidance: Balancing Flexibility with Clarity

**The role of clear and effective leadership, planning, foresight, and guidance are also important elements of (and can pose challenges to) effective Whole School Approach interventions.**

Leadership styles and the delivery of guidelines have followed varying models, with researchers advising that prescriptive guidelines for implementation (as are common in the USA) should be balanced with more flexible, bottom-up and democratic approaches

(often seen in European and Australian schooling systems).

Leaders must also ensure that changes to a school environment be phased in slowly, and that outcomes be continuously measured by acquiring data relevant to the school and local community, helping to make interventions **responsive, robust, and relevant**.



## Limitations of Whole School Approaches and Their Studies

**One of the main limitations of Whole School Approaches regards the complexity of implementing multi-component interventions.**

As discussed previously, a Whole School Approach requires extensive planning, resources, and commitment on the part of numerous individuals, making implementation very challenging. This is also reflected in the mixed evidence base for Whole School Approaches.

**While many reviews have found favourable results for Whole School Approach interventions, some findings are difficult to generalise or show smaller effects than might be desired.**

And while such results might lead some to think Whole School Approach interventions are simply ineffective, the truth of the matter tends to be more complex.

**A major issue with acquiring high-quality evidence for Whole School Approaches is that because of their far-reaching and extensive nature, they are often difficult to quantifiably measure, or show sufficient statistical ‘power’ as required in the highest-quality research.**

Whole School Approach interventions are therefore often excluded from academic review papers and therefore may also be excluded from recommendations of evidence-based interventions, despite the valuable contribution they may make to address real-world changes and improve outcomes among pupils, teachers, school, and communities.

**Further research is therefore required in this area to better understand the value and potential wide-reaching impact of a Whole School Approach.**

This should, however, not deter schools from conducting research and tailoring the intervention to suit their specific needs. Instead of being feeling deterred by such a project, schools should be commended on their desire to conduct such research.

It is vital to recognise the importance of schools conducting their own research, and their commitment to improving their own school outcomes.

**If a research project initially appears daunting, perhaps adopt a collaborative approach to research design, involving external research experts or other local schools.**

# Measurement

Due to the multi-population nature of Whole School Approaches, often most (if not all) of a school community's population is involved in measuring outcomes.

The current body of Whole School Approach research does not present a uniform method of measurement(s).

This is perhaps to be expected, as we have already emphasised the need for interventions and measurements to be responsive and reflective to a school's unique ecosystem.

There is a lack of measurement instruments designed specifically to be deployed in Whole School Approaches, which is partially to be expected given their complex and bespoke nature.

Consequently, we are unable to recommend specific measurements that schools should aim to include in the evaluation of every Whole School Approach intervention.

We can, however, point schools to different measurement approaches that might be effectively applied to evaluating your own Whole School Approach.

TABLE 2: SCHOOL LEVEL MEASURES

### Student Perceptions of School Scale

- Simple, 28-item survey made up of exclusively yes/no questions (bar one)
- Reliability considered to be high
- Draws on multiple existing scales and surveys
- Validated in English
- Suitable for students aged 9-18 years
- The questionnaire can be downloaded freely

### School Commitment Questionnaire/School Engagement Scale

- 23-item survey, with subscales, measuring various participation and school attachment factors
- Suitable for students aged 13-14 years
- Not enough information available to determine reliability or language validation

### Child Development Project Questionnaire

- Questionnaires for both students and teachers, plus an observational component
- Not enough information available to determine reliability
- Extensive student questionnaire consisting of a collection of different scales, totalling 219 items covering domains including:
  - School environment
  - Academic attitudes and motives
  - Personal attitudes, motives and feelings
  - Social attitudes, motives and behaviour
  - Cognitive/academic performance
- Validated in English

# Wessex Healthy Schools Award Scheme

- Measurements include an audit, student health questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, school observation, lesson observation, curriculum overview, policy review, and focus groups
- Not enough information available to determine reliability
- Validated in English
- Suitable for students aged 11-16 years and key staff in schools

### School Climate Assessment Instrument (SCAI)

- Questionnaires for students, teachers, parents with between 30 and 79 items depending on group
- Suitable for students from age 7, their teachers, and parents/carers
- Reliability considered to be high
- Validated in English and Spanish
- The questionnaire can be downloaded freely
- Eight subscales cover:
  - Physical appearance
  - Faculty relations
  - Student interactions
  - Leadership and decision-making
  - Discipline and management environment
  - Learning instruction and assessment
  - Attitude and culture
  - Community relations

### Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI)

- Questionnaires delivered to students, teachers/ staff, and parents, measuring five domains:
  - Safety
  - Teaching and learning
  - Interpersonal relationships
  - Institutional environment
  - Leadership and efficacy
- Suitable for students from age 8, their teachers, and parents/carers
- Reliability considered to be high
- Validated in English and Spanish

### California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey (CAL-SCHLS)

- Questionnaires delivered to students, teachers/ staff, and parents
- Suitable for students from age 10, their teachers, and parents/carers
- Reliability is mixed
- Validated in English, French and Spanish
- Simple questionnaire provided for younger students, with a larger and more detailed questionnaire for secondary-age students

### Meriden School Climate Survey-Student Version (MSCS-SV)

- Extensive 47-item survey designed to assess students' perceptions on various aspects of school life, focused on peer support
- Reliability is considered satisfactory
- Validated in English and Spanish
- Suitable for students from age 8
- The questionnaire can be downloaded freely

## Measurement Recommendations

Some Whole School Approach interventions have focused on student questionnaires as the primary measurement of success, whilst other approaches have incorporated students as just one of several groups.

**Given a Whole School Approach wellbeing intervention aims to be driven by, and have an effect on, the whole school community, we argue that the same holistic approach should be taken when choosing which measures to include in a Whole School Approach intervention.**

Measures which assess the interaction between different members of the school community are also important to highlight in the exploration of Whole School Approach measurement, as this can allow schools to have empirical evidence of the nature and health of the relationships within the school.

At the student level, such measurements might consider student-teacher communication, trust in and respect for teachers, and perceived democratic values of the school.

At a teacher-level, measurements might consider the level of interpersonal relationship between teacher and students, teacher trust in students, teacher trust in the senior leadership team and Head/Principal, and belief in the importance and promotion of student autonomy.

External observation of such interactions might consider teacher and student respect within a classroom context, or the responsiveness of teachers and students to the needs of each respective party.

The subject matter of the measurements should also be appropriate to the school context. For example, measurement of conflict and safety, or risky behaviour environments (such as smoking within school grounds) might be more relevant within certain school contexts but not as pressing in others (e.g., among adolescents rather than younger children).

Thought should also be given to the format of data collection; measurement items must be appropriately chosen for the target population and the variables of interest. These might include self-report questionnaires, observation of classrooms, as well as interviews.



## Further reading

Taylor, L. J., De Neve, J-E., DeBorst, L., & Khanna, D. (2020). *Wellbeing in Education in Childhood and Adolescence (Report No. 1)*. International Baccalaureate Organization.

Zhou, W., Taylor, L., Boyle, L., Funk, S., DeBorst, L., & De Neve, J-E. (2025). *Whole School Approach to Wellbeing in Childhood and Adolescence: Literature Review*. International Baccalaureate Organization.

## References

For a full list of references used in this report and access to additional supplementary materials, visit [wellbeing.hmc.ox.ac.uk/schools](https://wellbeing.hmc.ox.ac.uk/schools).

