What PISA 2015 results on students’ well-being imply for policy

Promoting well-being at school has become an important priority for education policy. Yet researchers, educators and parents still do not agree about the policies and practices that are more effective in fostering the healthy psychological, social, cognitive and physical development of students. This chapter discusses several policy initiatives, and frontline interventions by teachers and parents, that could help narrow disparities in well-being among students.
What is a successful student? Even if definitions of success vary, most educators and parents would agree that a successful student not only performs well academically but is also happy at school. Indeed, schools are not only places where students acquire academic skills; they are also social environments where children can develop the social and emotional competencies that they need to thrive.

All actors involved in education can promote students’ well-being with four main objectives: to improve children’s sense of purpose and positive feelings about their life; to prevent psychological and physical ill health; to nurture social interactions at school and create school environments that favour the development of caring, responsible and respectful adolescents; and to increase students’ confidence and engagement at school, so as to promote autonomous learning and thinking.

However, there is no consensus on which well-being programmes at school or curriculum changes are most needed. Some argue that other institutions should assume responsibility for children’s well-being – the family, above all. Others are concerned that directly teaching skills and behaviour at school to improve well-being (through prevention programmes for mental health, or activities that are explicitly designed to develop social or character skills, for example) might promote values that are espoused by educators or politicians but not by some parents (Arthur, 2005). Parents, educators and policy makers are also concerned that well-being programmes could affect student achievement by diverting time and money away from the teaching of academic subjects (Benninga et al., 2006).

Better data and more rigorous programme evaluations can provide essential information about the costs and benefits of integrating well-being activities in school curricula (Spence and Shortt, 2007). The data from PISA 2015 show that students differ greatly, both between and within countries, in how satisfied they are with their lives, in their motivation to achieve, in how anxious they feel about their schoolwork, in their participation in physical activities, in their expectations for the future, in their experiences of being bullied by their peers and in their perception of being treated unfairly by their teachers. Many of these differences are related to students’ impressions about the disciplinary climate in the classroom and the support their teachers give them. The data also show that parental involvement and adolescents’ sense of their parents’ support are associated with students’ feelings about schoolwork and their performance in PISA.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF RESULTS FROM PISA 2015 ON STUDENTS’ WELL-BEING**

**Psychological health, motivation and confidence at school**

PISA data show that in the majority of countries and economies, 15-year-old students rate their satisfaction with life at 7.3 on a scale from 0 to 10, on average (Chapter 3). However, a significant number of students in all countries reported worryingly low levels of life satisfaction. This international evidence is consistent with country studies showing that, at any one point in time, 3-5% of adolescents report suffering some degree of depression (Costello et al., 2003; Maughan, Collishaw and Stringaris, 2013).

Different types of interventions at school can help reduce the prevalence of serious psychological distress among adolescents. Universal prevention programmes can be applied to the entire student body, irrespective of individual students’ risk status; targeted programmes focus on adolescents who have a high risk of developing mental health problems (Sawyer et al., 2010). Universal programmes avoid stigmatising target groups and can benefit large numbers of students. However, these programmes are often difficult to implement as part of routine practice in schools (Sawyer et al., 2010).

Preventing mental ill health and promoting psychological well-being at school have focused on helping students develop optimistic thinking, self-regulation, problem-solving and coping skills, and techniques to relax (Merry et al., 2011). Experts in positive psychology argue that universal interventions at school can produce measurable improvements in students’ well-being and behaviour, with minimal demands on students’ time (Seligman et al., 2009).

While many schools are now investing considerable resources in universal mental health or positive psychology programmes, the evidence on the effectiveness of these initiatives is still limited (Sawyer et al., 2010). Most interventions have been relatively brief, and thus perhaps insufficient to produce lasting changes in attitudes and behaviours. Implementing school-based, universal interventions requires substantial planning and funding over several years. The effectiveness of these programmes also requires teachers to be fully engaged with the interventions and trained to implement them.

A complementary strategy to specific well-being programmes focuses on changing school environments (Sawyer et al., 2010). PISA data suggest in fact that students’ perceptions about their learning environment and their teachers are strongly related to their psychological well-being at school (Chapters 3 and 7).
Box III.14.1 Experiments in student-driven learning for well-being: The Free Semester initiative in Korea

Korean students are well known for their top marks in international assessments and their work ethic. But those high marks might be earned at a considerable cost: 22% of Korean students reported a level of life satisfaction that is less than or equal to 4 on a scale from 0 to 10 – nearly double the proportion of students across OECD countries who reported so (Table III.3.1). The Korean Ministry of Education’s Plan for 2014 seeks to improve students’ well-being through: a Free Semester initiative; curriculum changes, including the new Integrated Curriculum of Liberal Arts and Science; a stronger focus on humanities, arts, sports and character-building through activities and clubs; and the “Violence-Free Safe Schools” policy, which seeks to strengthen students’ mental health by introducing anonymous counselling systems, education to prevent cyberbullying, and early-detection systems to identify students at risk of depression (UNESCO, 2016).

The Free Semester initiative has attracted considerable attention. Since 2013, students in participating schools have an opportunity to take a semester “free” from exams and other formal methods of assessments in their first or second year of secondary school. In 2016, more than 3 000 lower secondary schools participated in this initiative. During the free semester, students spend half of their day on academic subjects, following student-driven learning methods that encourage engagement through experiments, student-led discussions, moot courts and other collaborative projects. Students spend the rest of the day in extracurricular activities (visual arts, music, sports) and exploring careers (externship/internship, job shadowing, external lectures) that give them a stronger sense of their aspirations and greater awareness of the skills they need to realise them.

During the free semester, teachers assess students using a qualitative and informative approach. Teachers provide more extensive performance feedback and give students more opportunities to reflect on their own performance. Although no nationwide evaluation of the initiative is available yet, survey results from 42 participating schools indicate that students and teachers who completed the free semester report higher satisfaction with their life at school, on average (Korea Education Development Institute, 2015). Critics of the initiative claim that not enough activities have been developed and that the loss of traditional teaching time may increase the workload for teachers, create more academic burdens for the remaining semesters, and have a negative impact on learners’ achievement in core subjects (UNESCO, 2016). Parents also expressed worries that the programme could impose more financial burdens if students need to make up for lost class hours with private education. If future evaluations show positive outcomes for learners’ development and well-being, the initiative could be expanded to other levels of education.

Train teachers to recognise and address schoolwork-related anxiety

PISA 2015 data show that schoolwork-related anxiety is common among adolescents (Chapter 4). Often, this anxiety is students’ reaction to, and interpretation of, the mistakes they make – or are afraid to make. Students internalise mistakes as evidence that they are not smart enough. Educators need to know how to help students develop a good understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, and an awareness of what they can do to overcome or mitigate their weaknesses.

Specific professional development can be offered to teachers so that they can identify those students who suffer from anxiety and teach these students how to learn from mistakes. Such training should provide teachers with practical tools they can use in their daily teaching. For example, one way to encourage a positive attitude towards mistakes is to take the most common mistakes that the class made on a test or quiz and let the students analyse them together.

Effective teacher training for students’ well-being combines theoretical knowledge with learning in practice under the guidance of accomplished practitioners. It also lets teachers reflect on their own practice, their roles, and students’ outcomes (Vescio, Ross and Adams, 2008). One example of such training combining theory, classroom practice and reflection about one own’s practice is the Preserve Health Education Programme developed at the University of Southampton (United Kingdom). The programme centres on an annual Health Day at the university, early in the training programme, consisting of an introductory lecture, a range of interactive workshops (e.g. gaining confidence in teaching sensitive issues, healthy eating, emotional health and well-being), and an exhibition in which various health and education agencies participate (Byrne et al., 2016). Later in the course, the trainee teachers consolidate their learning by completing follow-up, school-based tasks, such as finding out about the school’s education programmes, or observing, co-planning
and teaching lessons on health and well-being. Teachers reported that, after the training, they felt more confident teaching and dealing with students’ health and personal issues, and held more positive attitudes about promoting the well-being of their students (Byrne et al., 2016).

PISA 2015 data suggest that it is not the frequency of tests, but rather students’ perception of tests and other schoolwork as threatening that determines how anxious students feel (Chapter 4). More frequent assessments that start with easier goals and gradually increase in difficulty can build students’ competence and sense of control, as can opportunities for students to demonstrate their skills in other tasks or low-stakes tests before taking an assessment that counts.

Greater collaboration with specialised health services can help schools identify and treat students with the most serious anxiety disorders. Primary healthcare providers and family members can provide information about what the school might do, and the school can inform parents and healthcare providers about the student’s responses to school interventions. Developing a referral system of trusted health professionals is a simple practice that can yield long-term benefits for students and their families.

Box III.14.2 Online resources for teachers’ professional development on well-being: The Australian Student Wellbeing Hub

Teachers play a crucial role in students’ well-being. In their daily work, teachers need to address a variety of issues concerning the well-being of their students – issues that may have traditionally been considered the domain of families – and are generally willing to learn how to do so (Byrne et al., 2016). However, limited time and resources for professional learning may lead educators to feel they lack the knowledge and skills to address some life challenges their students are facing. Complex problems, like cyberbullying, require specific solutions for detecting risks and deciding on appropriate responses. Explicit training on social and emotional well-being can improve the level and type of support educators can offer their students, increase their confidence when they discuss emotional problems with students, and also help them make better sense of their daily experiences as teachers. Not all of this training needs to happen in a classroom. Carefully developed online learning resources can, in fact, offer dynamic and flexible opportunities for teachers’ professional development. The online environment has garnered increasing interest from educators as a place where they can meet their learning needs, know what other teachers are doing, and collaborate (Ola and Olofsson, 2010; Shute and Slee, 2016).

The Australian Government developed the Student Wellbeing Hub (studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/) as a one-stop-shop for information and resources on student well-being for the whole school community, including students and their parents. A wide pool of experts, academics, employers, and professional and civil society associations have contributed to the development of the online platform. The Educator section of the Hub is designed to advance teachers’ awareness of curricular and pedagogical approaches for well-being, and help schools build respectful and supportive learning communities. By navigating the hub, teachers can autonomously build their capacity to make a positive difference to their students’ well-being.

Through the site, educators can access targeted support to improve their practices for students’ well-being, including:

- self-paced professional learning modules, with videos, support materials, podcasts and practical strategies
- a school-audit survey tool through which school leaders and teachers can assess the effectiveness of their policies and procedures in relation to student safety and well-being
- classroom resources for teaching key topics, including the prevention of bullying, online safety, gender and cultural identity, and healthy habits
- helpful advice about effective methods for working with parents to ensure that students have safe interactions with peers and adults, both on line and off line.

These online resources complement, but are not a substitute for, more formal professional development activities and structured collaboration among teachers. Governments that want to invest in similar online platforms should consider including online opportunities for networking and coaching-style discussions, to allow for online contact with instructors and peers.

To find out more about the Australian Student Wellbeing Hub, go to: www.studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/.
Identify and share good practices to raise intrinsic motivation to achieve

Most students who participate in PISA reported that they set concrete, short-term goals for their school life, such as achieving a certain grade, or long-term goals, such as having the best opportunities when they graduate, for example (Chapter 5). These forms of motivation to learn are positively related to performance in PISA and to greater resilience among disadvantaged students. High levels of achievement motivation are also more common among students who reported that they are satisfied with their life.

Students who are encouraged to set realistic goals for their schoolwork may thus be able to boost their achievement and self-control, and find a sense of purpose in their time at school. Goal-setting might be particularly beneficial for boys, as PISA data suggest that underachievement among boys is related to boys’ lower motivation to achieve at school. Offering tangible rewards, like grades, or some moderate competition in the classroom might prompt greater efforts towards learning, especially if students see a particular assignment as boring or as a chore.

The issue is whether offering rewards focuses undue attention on tangible payoffs, instead of on the material that students are learning. In most classrooms, students compete for a limited number of rewards (e.g. good grades). Although this may increase motivation to achieve good results, students might be more motivated to “beat” others or avoid losing – both of which can instil a fear of failure and a sense of frustration (Covington and Müeller, 2001). PISA data show that students who want to be one of the best students in the class are often those who suffer the most anxiety (Chapter 5).

Strategies for enhancing intrinsic motivation to learn include providing choice and meaningful rationales for learning activities, acknowledging students’ feelings about the tasks, and avoiding excessive pressure and control. The first step for educators and education policy makers is to design education programmes and environments in which students can use and develop their abilities in productive and satisfying ways, while learning that, by investing greater effort, they can master more difficult skills.

Students are more likely to value what they are learning, and to enjoy the process of learning, when they set realistic goals for themselves and reach these goals; when the primary reason for investing effort are task-oriented and not related to seeking approval or avoiding failure; when students’ personal interests are stimulated by what they are studying; and when tasks are related to real-world experiences. It is important to set students’ goals at an appropriate level of difficulty. If the goal is set too high, it can reduce motivation and raise anxiety by undermining students’ sense of competence and control; but if the goal is too easily attainable, it will not be meaningful.

The need to promote productive forms of achievement motivation also has implications for the design of assessments. Challenging assessments can spur students to work harder, without necessarily provoking anxiety, frustration or fear of failure. For an assessment to be motivating, educators need to make clear to students what they need to learn to do well on the assessment and reward the achievement of mastery-based goals, such as demonstrating growth in their understanding, skills and content knowledge. Assessments that reward creativity, effort and strategising can also have a positive effect on motivation to learn (Usher, 2012). Providing constructive feedback on the results of assessments can nurture autonomy and intrinsic motivation.

Give students the means to take well-informed decisions for their future studies and careers

Psychological well-being is rooted in a sense of purpose in life. During their adolescence, students take many decisions that will have critical implications for their future. Adolescents thus need to be given the opportunity to reflect on the options they have for their careers, and to think about what they would like to do as adults with a fully informed perspective on the costs and benefits of different choices.

Chapter 6 shows that disadvantaged students are much less likely to expect that they will complete university than advantaged students. For many, it is a problem of access to information. If these students are the first in their family to think about attending university, the process of choosing courses and searching for scholarships might seem daunting and beyond their control. Some disadvantaged students might think that only “rich kids” go to university, and thus feel that it is worthless to try (Usher and Kobler, 2012). Some other disadvantaged students may have limited information about the lifelong gains (in salary and job security, to name just two) associated with higher education, or may not realise that a university degree might now be a requirement for the job they would like to do.

Social influences and lack of accurate information might also distort students’ choices in the opposite direction. Students from relatively advantaged families might think that a university degree is the only option for their education career, and not consider opportunities in vocational or technical education that might be a better fit for their work preferences and talents.
Box III.14.3 Education and Career Guidance in Singapore

Singapore has done well in PISA 2015, but is continuing to make important changes in its education system to prepare students even better for the future. Taking a lifelong perspective, multiple education-career pathways are being created that will enable students to discover and pursue their interests, and continuously develop social-emotional and cognitive skills. Education and career guidance is one important element to help students make informed decisions along their education and career journey (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2017).

The Education and Career Guidance programme allows Singaporean students to receive support in different aspects of education and career planning through counselling, mentoring and online courses (Cheng and Tan, 2016). The programme’s counsellors provide individualised support to students all the way from secondary to tertiary education, and work with various stakeholders to implement an education and career guidance plan customised for the individual student. Activities such as talks, fairs and learning journeys are also organised in collaboration with community and industry partners to help students explore their strengths and interests, in relation to their aspirations. These activities foster students’ social and emotional competencies (including self-identity, awareness, motivation and self-directedness), and improve workplace readiness.

Figure III.14.1 • The Singapore Education and Career Guidance framework from primary school to working life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Awareness</th>
<th>Exploring and planning</th>
<th>Crystallisation and planning</th>
<th>Developing and transitioning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Build self-awareness and personal management</td>
<td>Explore personal strengths, hobbies, interests</td>
<td>Develop self-awareness in areas of interest, abilities, values and career aspiration</td>
<td>Develop career self-concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore education, training and careers</td>
<td>Build awareness about the wide array of occupations in the world of work</td>
<td>Explore relevant courses of study and pathways linking to the world of work</td>
<td>Develop skills in acquiring and using sectoral career information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop plans and decision-making</td>
<td>Explore secondary schools and set goals in learning</td>
<td>Develop skills to plan, discuss with relevant others and make decisions on post-secondary education choices and careers</td>
<td>Develop school-to-work transition skills. Develop skills in planning and making informed decisions for further education and jobs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As part of the strategy to encourage young people to take greater ownership of their own learning throughout life, Singapore is launching a one-stop education, training and career guidance online portal for students and people in the workforce (SkillsFuture Singapore, 2017). By navigating a user-friendly platform, students can discover their interests and strengths, and explore various education and career pathways to realise their aspirations. This will be extended beyond schools so that when they join the workforce, they can use the portal to search for suitable jobs, manage their careers, and learn about new skills.

To find out more, go to: “SkillsFuture Programmes & Initiatives for you”, www.skillsfuture.sg/skillsfuture-for-you.

Schools, and local and national governments need to establish programmes that help students navigate education pathways and working opportunities. Education and career counselling at school can empower students to create their own paths to success by supporting their motivation to achieve and their resilience at school. This help should acknowledge that different students may have different goals, based on their mindsets, talents and career preferences. Partnerships with civil society, employers and professional organisations can help schools increase the effectiveness of these counselling programmes (OECD, 2004).
Positive peer and teacher-student relationships
Supportive social relationships are the foundation of resilience and well-being. Diener and Seligman (2002) compared extremely happy students with a control group of students who were not happy. When the researchers examined the characteristics of the happy students, they found that they differ significantly from the others in their rich and satisfying social life. These students had close relationships and intimate friendships. In an international survey led by UNESCO, friendships and positive relationships in the school community were ranked by both students and educators as the most important ingredient of a “happy” school (UNESCO, 2016).

Students’ level of engagement or disengagement with school is largely dependent on the degree to which their needs for competence, autonomy and belonging are fulfilled. Students’ psychological and social needs are met when they participate in a cohesive, caring group with a shared purpose – that is, when schools function as communities that value and promote understanding of and respect for others, and are inclusive and open (Battistich et al., 1997). The benefits of participating in a caring school community may be particularly great for disadvantaged students and, in particular, for disadvantaged students with an immigrant background or from minority groups.

Provide effective teacher training on classroom and relationship management
PISA 2015 data show that students differ significantly in their sense of belonging at school (Chapter 7). Disadvantaged students and students with an immigrant background tend to report less of a sense of belonging at school than other students. In PISA, a greater sense of belonging is significantly related to a large number of desirable outcomes, including better performance. PISA data also reveal that students’ sense of belonging at school has declined over the past decade, and that one major threat to students’ feelings of belonging at school are their perceptions of negative relationships with their teachers.

Schools can function as caring communities only if they have engaged teachers. Teachers who work hard to get to know their students, treat students as individuals with qualities and strengths, and communicate interest in the students’ personal lives outside of school often become inspiring figures in students’ lives. Most teachers care about having positive relationships with their students; but some teachers might be less prepared to deal with difficult students and classroom environments.

A stronger focus on classroom and relationship management in teacher training and professional development can give teachers the means to connect with their students and support their engagement at school. Classroom management is a complex issue and consists of far more than establishing and imposing rules, rewards and incentives to manage behaviour. Effective classroom management involves practices and instructional techniques to create a learning environment that facilitates and supports active engagement in learning, encourages co-operation and promotes behaviour that benefits other people or society as a whole (McDonald, 2013). Teachers’ mastery of classroom management facilitates both teaching and learning (OECD, 2016a), supports students’ sense of belonging (Chapter 7), and reduces the incidence and negative effects of offensive behaviour (Chapter 8). Through effective training in relationship management, teachers can more effectively support their students. In most contexts, such training should teach educators how to take into account diverse learners’ needs – especially those of minority groups – and give teachers a command of basic methods of observation, listening and intercultural communication.

Schools can also identify further professional development needs by regularly collecting feedback from students on the quality of the learning environment. By having a formal instrument to express their views and needs, students can develop a stronger sense of ownership and autonomy in their schools.

Prevent bullying and provide support to victims, bullies and bystanders
PISA 2015 data show that a significant proportion of students reported being victims of bullying at school (Chapter 8). Bullying has serious consequences for the victim, the bully and the bystanders. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to preventing bullying. What emerges clearly from the PISA data, however, is that schools must do more to foster an environment of safety, tolerance and respect for children. A co-ordinated, international analysis of existing strategies and support mechanisms can shed light on what schools can do in the difficult struggle to assure students’ safety at school, and what national and local authorities can do to support schools in this effort.

Effective anti-bullying programmes involve a whole-school approach, with co-ordinated engagement among teachers, students and parents. Several of the anti-bullying programmes that have proved to be successful include training for teachers on how to handle bullying behaviour and its associated group processes, anonymous surveys of students to monitor the prevalence of bullying, and strategies to provide information to and engage with parents.
Box III.14.4 Improving the learning environment to fight bullying: The case of Castile and Leon

Castile and Leon is a sparsely populated region in northwest Spain with a per capita GDP slightly below the Spanish average and about 15% lower than the European Union average (OECD, 2016b). Yet students in Castile and Leon have consistently shown outstanding performance since they first participated in PISA in 2003, particularly in science, leading some commentators to dub the region the “Spanish Finland”. In PISA 2015, students in Castile and Leon scored 519 points in science, 522 points in reading and 506 points in mathematics. Only 5% of students were low achievers in all three subjects, compared to 13% of students across OECD countries (OECD, 2016a).

Castile and Leon has also been exemplary in students’ well-being since 2004, when it implemented the School Learning Environment Plan (Plan de Convivencia Escolar), which made students’ well-being a policy priority. The central goal of the plan was to create a positive learning environment where the rights and duties of all education stakeholders are guaranteed, and students can learn to become engaged citizens by developing their cognitive, emotional, social and physical skills. The plan includes multiple actions, including anti-bullying procedures, public recognition for schools with good well-being practices, and the appointment of a school environment co-ordinator. Two of the main instruments of the plan are CONV and Sociescuela.

CONV is an information system that monitors schools’ learning environment and identifies schools that are struggling with student behaviour problems. Twice a year, virtually all publicly funded schools report on their learning environment plan; the frequency, seriousness and types of behavioural problems in their schools and the corrective measures taken, if any; and the meetings and activities organised to create a better learning environment. Schools then use this information to draft a report describing their learning environment, which is then incorporated into the provincial and regional reports.

Sociescuela is an online survey that any student can take to assess their well-being. Head teachers can use the survey to assess students’ relationships in a particular class or in the entire school. The survey includes questions about students’ well-being, their self-confidence, and their friendships and conflicts, and about the school’s disciplinary climate. Based on students’ self-reports and witnesses’ testimonies, the survey identifies the (potential) victims of bullying, the type of bullying, the bullies, and the students who are considered respectful and supportive. The group report also contains detailed information on the behaviour, attitudes and personality of the victims, as perceived by their classmates. In short, the report includes the type of information that principals and teachers need to deal effectively with a case of bullying.

Data from Spain (Díaz-Aguado Jalón et al, 2010) show that in the year 2007-08, bullying rates were lower in Castile and Leon, affecting 1 in 40 students, than in Spain as whole, where 1 in 26 students reported being bullied. PISA 2015 data confirm that students in Castile and Leon reported one of the lowest bullying rates among Spanish Autonomous Communities. For instance, only 1.7% of students in Castile and Leon agreed or strongly agreed that they were threatened by other students, compared to 2.6% of students in Spain and 3.7% of students, on average, across OECD countries.

Recently, Castile and Leon is adopting more systemic, participative and integrated approach for well-being at school. An example of this new strategy is the new anti-bullying plan (Plan antiacoso y por el buen trato), that incorporates new measures to reduce the prevalence of bullying even further. These measures include:

- a stronger focus on supporting victims and re-educating offenders, in addition to the traditional goal of eradicating bullying
- updating the intervention protocol in bullying incidents, particularly those related to cyberbullying, following the goals and principles of awareness, prevention, protection, confidentiality, co-ordinated action, collective solutions, systematisation, efficacy and urgency
- co-ordinating the plans and actions of all public and private institutions involved in the fight against bullying.

Links to further information:
Teachers have a particularly important role to play in preventing bullying. They need to communicate to students that they will not tolerate any form of bullying, and act as role models in the classroom. Teachers who clearly stand for antibullying norms strengthen their students’ goal to act appropriately (Veenstra et al., 2014). Students and teachers can work together at reducing bullying. For this cooperation to happen, teachers need to play a central role in antibullying interventions. Furthermore, incorporating bullying-prevention modules in initial teacher training can ensure that all teachers have basic preparation in detecting and reacting to different acts of bullying.

Another important strategy against bullying is building partnerships between schools and parents. Parents need to be involved in school planning and responses to bullying.

Effectively organising antibullying interventions is crucial. With a combination of universal, whole-group interventions and targeted interventions to tackle acute cases of bullying, schools can effectively cooperate with other services to prevent and solve many cases of bullying.

**Positive synergies between the school and home environments**

Even within the same school, students differ greatly in their material, social and cultural resources at home. These differences can be a significant source of inequality in students’ well-being. Parents from disadvantaged backgrounds might have less resources to invest in their child’s education, and less time to spend with their child. A way to promote students’ well-being is to encourage all parents to be more involved with their child’s interests and concerns, show interest in their school life, and be more aware of the challenges children face at school.

Schools can create an environment of co-operation with parents and communities. Teachers can be given better tools to enlist parents’ support, and schools can address some critical deficiencies of disadvantaged children, such as the lack of a quiet space for studying. If parents and teachers establish relationships based on trust, schools can rely on parents as valuable partners in the cognitive and socio-emotional education of their students. Parents can also more confidently rely on teachers for exchanging information and views on the social and psychological development of their children. Accounting for students’ differences in their family resources also means creating equitable learning spaces at school, where children from all socio-economic backgrounds are treated equally and can develop high expectations for themselves.

**Encourage parental involvement and remove barriers to participation in school activities**

During adolescence, some changes in how children communicate with their parents and in which activities they enjoy together are inevitable. Children may show an increased interest (even preference) for the company of their peers. Add to this the long hours many parents spend at work and it is easy to see that “quality time” for parents and their adolescent children may need to be scheduled in advance. But such efforts are worthwhile: PISA data from 18 countries confirm that across wide cultural, socio-economic and individual differences, the value of supportive parents cannot be overestimated (Chapter 9). Students whose parents routinely engage in day-to-day home-based activities, such as eating a meal together or spending time “just talking” not only score higher in PISA, but are also more satisfied with their lives.

PISA 2015 findings underline the importance of students’ perception of their parents’ interest in their school activities. Students who regard their parents as being interested in their school life perform better, reported higher achievement motivation, and are more likely to be highly satisfied with their lives than students who reported a lack of parental interest. Low-performing students might benefit even more than high-performers from supportive parenting.

For some parents, spending time just talking to their child is a rare occurrence; others find it difficult to participate in their children’s school life. These difficulties may be related to inflexible work schedules, lack of childcare services, or language barriers. But schools can do a lot to help parents overcome these barriers. They can first try to identify those parents who may be unable to participate in school activities. They can open flexible channels of communication, such as scheduled phone or video calls, which are simple, but effective, solutions to accommodate busy parents who cannot easily leave work to attend school meetings. Governments can also take action by providing incentives to employers who adopt policies to improve the work-life balance.

In those countries and communities where large shares of parents reported not knowing how they can participate in their child’s school life or who believe that their participation is not relevant for their child’s development, schools and teachers can help raise awareness among parents about the importance and benefits of their participation and suggest ways in which they can get involved both at home and in school. Parents’ lack of familiarity with school rules,
lack of information about opportunities for involvement, or their perception of an intimidating social divide are all obstacles that schools can help dismantle. Teachers can plan welcoming “open houses” and encourage all parents to participate, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds whose children need their support the most. Through their engagement, parents can be a powerful force in building a learning environment that encourages both high achievement and the well-being of students.

Removing language barriers can also increase the level of parents’ participation in school activities. In countries with large immigrant populations, including many European countries, schools may need to partner with immigration and social service agencies to provide interpreters, for example. In some other countries, non-immigrant parents reported confronting language barriers, a problem that disproportionally affects less-educated, less-privileged parents. This may be an indication that some parents feel intimidated when interacting with well-educated teachers and school staff. Schools may need to improve the way they welcome parents from culturally, linguistically and socio-economically diverse backgrounds.

**Address the impact of socio-economic inequalities on students’ perceptions about themselves and their aspirations for the future**

PISA data show that the education and occupation expectations of disadvantaged students are related to the socio-economic profile and composition of their school (Chapter 10). Social segregation that groups poor students in poor schools might inadvertently set limits on students’ expectations for, and beliefs in, themselves, reducing social mobility. Governments should strive to have excellent schools in every neighbourhood that are accessible and welcoming to all children and families (OECD, 2016a). However, school segregation is difficult to eliminate, as it is usually related to structural features of labour markets, institutions and residential markets.

Students could also be given the means to think critically about inequality – about the obstacles disadvantaged students face, and the internal or external resources they can use to overcome these obstacles. Teachers can follow specific professional development modules to better understand the dynamics of social, economic and cultural diversity, and work with all students to reduce some of their negative effects on the self-esteem and expectations of the most vulnerable students. Rather than ignoring the effects of socio-economic differences among students, teachers could try to identify the aspects of these differences that may be harming the well-being of the most vulnerable students. Skilful interventions by teachers can also make peer influences a force for good, helping to raise the expectations of disadvantaged students about what they can accomplish, with hard work and dedication, in school and in life.

Teachers who have good relationships with their students are better equipped to address some learning difficulties that are related to disadvantaged students’ life outside of school. For example, PISA data show that many disadvantaged students work for pay before or after school (Chapter 12). These students might have a harder time meeting their school obligations and might need extra support from their teachers and school.

School leaders also need to understand the challenges and opportunities of educating mixed groups of students. Schools may indeed reflect existing inequalities in the broader society, but school leaders can work to reduce the impact of these inequalities on students’ lives by creating a school environment that is welcoming, stimulating and inclusive for all teachers, staff members and students.

**Opportunities to learn about healthy living habits**

**Teach the benefits of an active and healthy lifestyle through physical and health education**

PISA data in Chapter 11 show that students’ participation in physical education differs across countries. Students’ participation in physical activities in school is positively associated with their physical activity outside of school. The quality of physical and health education might also differ within countries (Bailey, 2006).

Over the years, several education systems have promoted new curricula and approaches to physical education that help students to build physical literacy (the ability to move with competence in a variety of physical activities) and health literacy (the skills needed to find, understand and use information to make good decisions for health). For example, the 2015 Health and Curriculum of Ontario (Canada) defines a comprehensive set of knowledge and skills that students should acquire through health and physical education (Ministry of Education [Ontario], 2015). The practical approach adopted in all courses in this curriculum is related to the everyday experiences of students. The curriculum also promotes important education values and goals that help develop character and create supportive school communities. These include striving to achieve one’s personal best, equity and fair play, sensitivity and respect for individual differences.
Sharing similar good practices in health and physical education internationally can increase the positive effects on well-being of the hours that students dedicate to these pursuits. An effective physical and health education curriculum is balanced if it addresses the physical, cognitive, psychological and social needs of students, thus focusing on group activities that are specifically designed to foster interaction skills. The curriculum content and learning activities in physical education should be constantly updated so that they reflect the real-life contexts and opportunities for sports and an active life that are available to students in their own community. The format and content of the courses should also be adaptable and recognise individual differences, allowing for differentiation of instruction according to a student’s readiness, physical ability and interests.

PISA does not collect data on students’ body image; but the data suggest that some students, particularly girls, do not eat their meals regularly (Chapter 11), possibly because they have an unrealistic idea of what they look like – or think they “should” look like (Box III.11.4). Education about body image and the risks of eating disorders is an important aspect of physical and health education. Having the correct information and education can help prevent children from developing an eating disorder, ease the suffering of young people in the early stages of an eating disorder, and reduce the stigma and misconceptions that surround such disorders. Efforts to promote positive body image and healthy lifestyle choices can be integrated into every school’s teaching programme as way to prevent eating disorders from developing, rather than as a response to existing problems.

**Promote healthy and productive use of the Internet**

The objective of schools is to prepare students for active, effective and responsible participation in society. Online resources have become an essential component of this preparation. PISA data in Chapter 13 show that young people have fully embraced the Internet as a tool for socialising, and many think that the Internet is a great resource to search for the most up-to-date information.

Teenagers often spend a significant amount of time on the Internet, disengaging from other forms of recreation and face-to-face interactions. In PISA 2015, 26% of students reported that they spend more than six hours per day on line during weekends, and 16% spend a similar amount of time on line during weekdays. More than one in two students reported that they feel bad if they do not have access to the Internet. In most participating countries and economies, extreme Internet use – more than six hours per day – has a negative relationship with students’ life satisfaction, sense of belonging and engagement at school.

Cyberbullying represents another risk associated with online activities. While PISA does not distinguish between online and face-to-face bullying, other evidence shows that the incidence of cyberbullying is on the rise (Box III.8.1).

There are no quick fixes for these two risks of the digital era. Schools need to create opportunities for students to share their understanding of digital technology and challenges with adults and peers. They can also develop a clear incident-response plan for staff in the event of violations of safety norms and cyberbullying, provide access to in-school counselling to students involved in cyber-related incidents, and introduce a “digital safety” theme across school policies and practices. Parents should also be involved in discussions and decisions about online safety. Digital safety plans should be integrated into a wider education strategy to strengthen psychological and social skills, such as resilience, empathy, ethical decision-making and conflict resolution.

Preventing the misuse of the Internet at school also requires making sure that technologies are used at school for high-quality educational activities – which, in turn, calls for investments in professional and curriculum development.
References


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