



Schools could be the happiest places on Earth

Paying attention to well-being indicators also could make students more academically successful.



Imagine you're going to a place where you could learn new things from smart people who care about you, laugh with your friends throughout the day, and dream about the future. Wouldn't you be happy there? Most schools are set up to be such places, with bright, caring teachers ready to share what they know, hundreds of students who really like or really dislike some of the same things, and a focus on getting people ready for the future.

Schools are fairly happy places. Most American students have high levels of well-being, and teachers have cornered the market on thriving. With a little help

from parents and the broader community, schools could be the happiest places on Earth. Results from the Gallup Student Poll tell us that many students have positive yesterdays, and the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index and the PDK/Gallup Poll help us understand some of the influences on school well-being.

No troubles yesterday

On the 2010 Gallup Student Poll, we measured how students experience their lives by focusing on four positive emotions (joy, interest, respect, overall energy) they felt on the previous day (which was a school day for most respondents). For the

most part, American students, grades 5 through 12, said they had positive yesterdays.

- 77% were treated with respect all day yesterday.
- 89% smiled or laughed a lot yesterday.
- 76% learned or did something interesting yesterday.
- 86% had the energy to get things done yesterday.

Fewer than half of the students said yes to all four items. When we put these results to the test in a group of high school freshmen, we

SHANE J. LOPEZ (shane@strengths.org) is senior scientist in residence at Gallup, Inc., Omaha, Neb., and an architect of the Gallup Student Poll.



found that the students who were happy when polled, went on to do better in school over the course of the term — completing more credits at a higher grade point average. This well-being bump for academic performance was not surprising given that psychological research suggests that frequency of positive emotions is associated with many types of life success.

These results may stem from conditions in schools, including the quality of the environment and teacher well-being, and from how families and communities treat students during the school week. A closer look at how teachers might be influencing school well-being might help us understand the student voice and daily experience. Other factors are parent thoughts on the subject and the role of the broader community's well-being in school well-being.

Teachers' well-being

Teachers also have high well-being. This finding is based on representative findings from the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index. Compared to workers in more than a dozen other fields, teachers rank #1 in five of six well-being categories, including the Emotional Health Index that is based on items similar to the ones that students completed. Teacher happiness is believed to be related to the happiness and coping of students on a daily basis and over time.

Teacher well-being also is vitally important to student achievement as demonstrated by Robert Briner's research on over 12,000 teachers in the United Kingdom. The well-being of the teacher staff accounted for 8% of the variance in student achievement on high-stakes testing.

Parents and well-being

The 2011 PDK/Gallup Poll asked parents about their perceptions of schools as well-being centers, places where students can learn and grow and achieve both academic outcomes and develop life skills that will help them become ready for the future. Generally, parents consider schools to be organizations that encourage well-being, which suggests they might be supportive of new or tweaked programming to foster student thriving.

What of the other adults in a community? Some might argue that how community members experience their lives, positively or negatively, has little to do with how well neighborhood students do in school. Though there is very little research on this subject, some preliminary work finds that a community's overall level of well-being is associated with student scores on important math, reading, and science tests.

Happiest place on Earth

Sure, we want our kids to be happy. You won't find any parents, teachers, or principals lobbying against a "happy kids" initiative. But, you won't find many that truly understand the benefits of students having a positive yesterday. This type of well-being is not just the outcome of doing good work at school, it's also a predictor of being academically successful.

So, acknowledging this happiness-success link actually will help students understand how their emotions are associated with their school and work behaviors. Accordingly, Step #1 to building school well-being is making it as much a priority as improving academic performance.

Build school well-being

Step #1

Make boosting well-being a goal.

Step #2

Examine the school environment and rules. Shore up those that give people as much autonomy as possible; remove those that unnecessarily constrain freedom.

Step #3

Identify your happiest teachers, staff, and students, and give them the job to spread happiness.

Once students, teachers, and staff see that their well-being is valued at school, they become more active partners in the goal itself.

School settings, policies, and practices that promote autonomy will provide the right conditions to foster well-being to most students and teachers. Conditions that undermine autonomy will hamstring happiness. So, Step #2 to school happiness is a well-being audit that examines the environment and rules of the school with the goal of shoring up those that give people as

much autonomy as possible and removing those that unnecessarily constrain freedom.

Step #3 to school well-being is straightforward: Identify your happiest teachers, staff, and students, and give them the big job of spreading happiness. They will find the strategies that work for your school.

When we decide to work as hard at raising well-being as we have at improving performance on assessments, test scores will go up. Happy, successful students . . . isn't that what we all want? **K**

Gallup Student Poll

The Gallup Student Poll is a landmark new measure that captures the youth voice, a critical but too often missing part of the national dialogue surrounding student performance and success. The Gallup Student Poll will track for 10 years the hope, engagement, and well-being of public school students in grades 5 through 12 across the United States.

The findings are based on a nationally representative sample of 695 young people, and supported by convenience samples of nearly a half million students. The percentage of engaged students is based on a scoring formula that accounts for responses to all five items.

Public schools and districts may participate at no cost. Learn more at gallupstudentpoll.com.