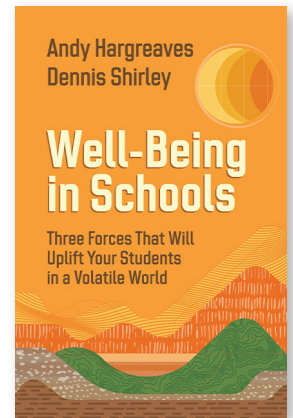


# Well-Being in Schools

*Three Forces That Will Uplift Your Students  
in a Volatile World*

by **Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley**



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## THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Even before the global pandemic disrupted in-classroom education and led to a well-being crisis for students and teachers alike, students' well being was becoming an emergency concern among educators and administrators. Mental health among young people has been precipitously declining, while global crises and social media have had negative impacts that are impossible to miss. But can teachers really increase students' wellbeing in a meaningful way against such staggering odds? New research findings shows that they can. *Well-Being in Schools* is led by that research to present the three forces that will uplift students in a volatile world— prosperity for all, ethical technology use, and restorative nature.

In this summary, teachers, leaders and policymakers will receive breakthrough insights for how to improve students' well-being in schools— and remarkable proof that such improvements to well-being lead to better performance and long-term outcomes for all students in school and beyond as they progress through society.

## IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Ideas and research findings that show how to increase well-being in schools.
- How to put well-being ahead of scores— and why you should.
- How to set up effective well-being policy and practice by focusing on prosperity for all, ethical technology use, and restorative nature.

### Introduction

Even before US President Joe Biden was elected in 2020, he pledged that his administration would “build back better” after a raging pandemic that claimed more than half a million US lives and led to unemployment and poverty levels that were unprecedented in modern times. The phrase “getting better,” of course, has a double meaning. It refers to recovery of health after being sick and to improving over time. Building back better has to mean more than mere recovery, important as that is. All was far from well beforehand. Building back better, in the US and everywhere else, must therefore also see a determination to improve people’s health, compared to how it was before the pandemic.

The global pandemic didn’t just make people sick. It exposed how sick many aspects of modern society were already. Think of the under-resourced, for-profit care homes, or nursing homes, as they are variously called, that placed seniors in thinly disguised waiting rooms for their final journey to the funeral home. Consider the care staff in these homes, living a gig-economy existence that required them to move from home to home, picking up and carrying infection with them, as they tried to hold down multiple jobs to make ends meet. What about the migrant farm laborers, huddled together in little more than shacks, with no rights or protections, earning pitifully low wages, just so the rest of us could get our fresh fruits and vegetables? What about all the essential workers on zero-hour contracts, who, we have learned, are often living in a world with no security, just one paycheck away from destitution?

The world has reached a parlous state when starving children tear open deliveries from the local food bank because school closures mean that their schools can no longer feed them. At the same time, we have seen that some children were relieved to be learning at home, because this meant that they no longer had to endure taunts and bullying at school. It is shocking to discover that schools and school districts in the United States and the UK were threatened with fines or withdrawal of funding if they didn’t open up their schools again—even when infection rates that governments were failing to control remained perilously high.

Let’s hope that after the pandemic, the predictions of epidemiologist Nicholas Christakis, in *Apollo’s Arrow*—that we will relive the Roaring 20s that followed the 1918 pandemic—will turn out to be wrong. Let’s extend the inspiring spirit of community that arose at times during the pandemic to offer one another help and solidarity. Let’s

not forget that one of our prime directives in schools is to help young people feel safe, cared for, fulfilled, and thriving, so that they prosper in the school and beyond it. Let’s bring the public good, in equitable schools for all, back to the fore. Let’s not go back to the worst of what we had before, but instead build back better for all young people’s well-being for the future. As a start, in this book summary, we now turn to what the best of well-being can look like, and to how we can set about developing it.

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### What is Well-Being? Why Does It Matter?

Well-being is a big deal. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was already moving closer to the forefront of policy priorities in education. Then the pandemic cruelly reminded us that health and wellbeing must come before everything—in society as well as in our schools. But it is not just viruses that threaten our well-being. War, conflict, environmental devastation, intolerance, prejudice, and division also harm our well-being. So do loneliness, isolation, and living in a virtual world at the expense of the physical world.

Learning to be and learning to live together are not just abstract ideals. They are achievable in real programs and policies that help us connect our own health to the health of the world. Yet opportunities to be healthy and to be well are not distributed evenly. Well-being does not mean the same thing for everyone, in every culture. It may be “loud and proud” in Texas, “as bold as brass” in Northern England, or humble and self-effacing in East Asian cultures with Confucian heritages and Buddhist associations. There is a lot to learn about what well-being is, what it looks like, how we can recognize it when we see it, and how it is affected by inequality and diversity. These are some of the big questions we raise in this book.

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### Theories of Well-Being: Evidence and Influence

Because of the onset of accountability-driven policies such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, approaches consistent with whole child philosophies have been scattered and sporadic. For that reason, in 2007, ASCD launched a Whole Child Initiative to “change the conversation about education from a focus on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes the long-term development and success of all children.” It asserted a

humanistic philosophy of learning and development that is about the importance of the whole child now and not just those parts of the child that might be economically useful in the future or that would comply with accountability demands in the present.

ASCD's five Whole Child tenets, based upon Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, have underpinned ASCD's framework:

1. "Each child enters school healthy" and is taught how to develop "a healthy lifestyle."
2. "Each child learns in an environment that is physically and emotionally safe."
3. All students are "actively engaged in learning and connected to the school and broader community."
4. Every student "is supported by qualified, caring adults" with proper professional qualifications.
5. "Each student is challenged academically" and is poised for "success in college or further study and for employment" as well as for "participation in a global environment" after completing high school.

How has the Whole Child Initiative played out in practical terms in its partnership schools? One example is Hamilton Elementary School in Port Angeles, Washington, where principal Gary Pringle and his staff wanted to create an environment "where high performance, kindness, self-responsibility, and playfulness are the expectations." This promotion of play led to the integration of "health, nutrition, and physical fitness into school activities and the curriculum," with parents and caregivers also encouraged to participate in a Families in Training after-school program that established "monthly challenges" pegged to "Healthy Fitness Zone Standards." In another case, Butterfield Trail Middle School in Arkansas promotes its students' well-being by cultivating a sustainable garden and by revising its curriculum so that it now "incorporates science and nutrition into instruction while promoting long-term health education."

### Questioning Well-Being: The Quest to Do Better

It's important to raise some questions about aspects of well-being that psychologists may have misinterpreted or missed altogether. These questions establish a firmer foundation for understanding why well-being has assumed such

importance today and what particular forms it takes in the dynamic and diverse societies in which we live.

The questions we raise are as much about what's missing from our data and from what we've seen in schools as it is about what is problematic. This means that we don't just report what educators have told us, but we also probe deeply into things they left unsaid that may matter a great deal.

The four questions are:

1. Does the well-being agenda wrongly claim to be able to solve massive social problems with individualistic, psychological solutions?
2. Might well-being advocates unintentionally end up producing a generation of self-absorbed narcissists?
3. What's the point of having initiatives in well-being if other parts of the school system are perpetrating ill-being?
4. Are our ideas about well-being culturally biased?

If well-being is perceived as being unconnected to learning or achievement, if it is seen as self-indulgence, if it is undermined by other policies that actually create ill-being, or if the approved ways of being well do not fit with some of the cultures to which children belong, it will attract criticism and undermine public confidence. Well-being is a part of our cultures and societies that in turn help define who we are. Well-being, in this respect, is affected by changes and variations in our cultures. For this reason, we examine two social changes that have brought the well-being agenda into prominence, and in the chapter after that, we look at three ways in which that agenda can and should unfold in the near future.

### The Rise of Well-Being: Between GERM and VUCA

For at least 30 years, nation after nation pushed whole child education to the margins of their policies. A burgeoning movement put data and measurement at the center of school reform. It was obsessed with maximizing economic growth and improving performance numbers in everything from industrial assembly lines to health targets and flight times. Inevitably, raising students' test scores got caught up in the same surge.

GERM and related "results-first" programs have lingered, like a stubborn virus that has not yet met up with a vaccine or a cure, in spite of growing evidence of its incalculable

damage. Meanwhile, another age has now started to surface alongside it: one that business and policy specialists call “VUCA.”

Arising from business management theory in the 1980s but increasingly used in military strategy, business, politics, and organizational studies since the early 2000s, VUCA is an acronym for four new states of social and political life:

1. Volatility of change that occurs at accelerating speed in shifting directions.
2. Uncertainty of evidence, information, and capacity to predict the future.
3. Complexity of intersecting forces.
4. Ambiguity regarding what events and circumstances actually mean to people of different identities and perspectives.

Not surprisingly, this convergence of forces has created a mental health crisis among young people of global proportions.

Beyond COVID-19, young people’s well-being will depend on more investment, not less, because many of them will be in particular need of extra counseling and support. Children need to be in school for economic, educational, and mental health reasons. But given all we have learned about the primacy of child well-being, the economic consideration should not ignore, override, or undermine the other two. We must find a better way to connect the big picture of social and economic change before, during, and after the pandemic to the protection and promotion of young people’s day-to-day wellbeing and quality of life.

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### Prosperity for All: The Social Economics of Well-Being

Many of the skills and dispositions that are identified with and influenced by social psychology serve a valuable purpose in schools and are tools that teachers can use to help their kids to be healthy and to thrive. Teachers can take care of basic needs for security and safety. They can help students build themselves up to become resilient and bounce back from setbacks and adversity.

We can have classrooms and schools where children develop an irrepressible, Dolly Parton–like sense of buoyancy, so they are hard to push down in the first place. Schools

can teach kids language and strategies to be calm and quiet when their emotions run out of control. They can provide opportunities for exercise, breathing, and stretching, so that children’s bodies are not at odds with their minds. Schools can also cultivate growth mindsets, so that students do not become downcast or feel defeated when they cannot understand or accomplish something at first. All these are invaluable things to teach everyone—especially those who are most vulnerable.

Research in social psychology provides teachers with evidence-informed approaches to enhance their students’ well-being. It has given teachers tools and insights that go far beyond the old adage of setting high expectations. Now there is a body of research and practice that shows exactly how those high expectations can be acted upon to improve learning and well-being.

Yet well-being still comes down to more than individual behaviors in individual classes and schools. States of well-being vary across social groups. The coronavirus crisis affected practically everyone’s mental health, but teenagers were more vulnerable than most. Suicide is always a personal tragedy, but in 1897, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim was the first to point out that suicide rates varied depending on how socially integrated or not the societies were in which suicides occurred. Today, youth suicide rates are much higher among vulnerable groups in Indigenous communities, among students who are LGBTQ, or in countries where school examination pressures operate at extreme levels and create cultures of anxiety and perfectionism. Educators must look beyond blaming and shaming individuals for mental health issues, and look at their social determinants instead.

A comprehensive approach to student and teacher well-being must therefore consider social as well as psychological dimensions. We have to take an interdisciplinary stance and address the social, economic, and political conditions in the societies and communities in which students are educated and how they optimize or interfere with young people’s prospects of being well. We have to engage our students with learning how to contribute to their communities and societies, now and in the future, in ways that support their own and others’ physical and mental health, alongside academic success.

Students and educators are whole human beings. Their lives and their work are part of the world and are not set apart from it. They are all affected by the bigger picture of social, economic, and environmental change. We believe they should also be responsible for contributing to and help-

ing to shape that big picture in a conscious and deliberate way, through how students learn, what educators teach, and how they all live their lives.

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### Ethical Technology Use: The Moral Side of Screen Life

Before the pandemic, one of the issues that most divided opinion among teachers and parents was the use of technology in schools. Enthusiasts embraced and advanced the idea of digital learning taking place anytime, anywhere. Digital technology, they believed, would engage students, ignite innovation, and put an end to the “factory schools” that belonged to a bygone era. Opponents, meanwhile, regarded digital devices as instruments that trivialized learning, undermined the professionalism of teachers, distracted students, and threatened their well-being. Although some systems provided laptops and other devices for every child, others imposed total bans on smartphones on school premises.

What can we conclude from this collection of divergent research and opinion about digitally based learning and its relationship to student well-being? What deliberations and decisions should teachers and schools make about the use of technology in relation to learning and well-being?

The future of digital technology will have a huge societal influence on student well-being. How far schools and school systems are willing to take an evidence-informed and ethically seamless approach to its use will determine whether that influence turns out to be positive or negative. An ethical and seamless approach to digital technology use urges all of us to address equity and inclusion of access. It enhances quality of use in terms of benefits for learning and well-being rather than just expanding delivery through hybrids and blends. Last, it supports strategies for combating risks related to addiction and screen use. Technology should not be presented as a shining knight that comes to rescue students and teachers from the (so-called) “dark ages” of schooling. Instead, technology should be a shining light that brightens up teaching and learning practices that are already pedagogically strong.

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### Restorative Nature: For People and the Planet

If we are to get children out of their concrete and metal boxes, we must think outside the box ourselves. We need to

do a lot more than add a few outdoor camping trips or field excursions to the regular curriculum. Children need to be in touch with nature every day, not just as an add-on or a special treat.

We can start by adopting the common practice in Nordic countries to get children outside for some playing time every 50 minutes or so—not just a choreographed body-break in class, but free play in the open air, outdoors. Then we can learn from what many teachers and schools did during the pandemic (and what many teachers in less developed countries have been doing forever) and teach parts of the curriculum outside.

The capacity to teach one’s subject or curriculum in an outdoor environment should become part of all teachers’ training and ongoing professional development. Outdoor learning options should also be included in online curriculum guides for potential activities across the curriculum. Natural, physical, and environmental competences should be accorded as high a priority as digital competence. People’s lives and the future of the planet may well depend on it.

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### Well-Being and Success: Opposites that Can Attract

Well-being and achievement shouldn’t exist in two different worlds, with different specialists populating them—mathematics and literacy people on one side, mental health specialists on the other. At every level, from the school up to the whole system, it’s important to establish clear structures that unite those who have portfolios and responsibilities in curriculum and learning with those who have expertise in well-being and mental health. Leaders themselves need to create, articulate, and repeat clear and compelling narratives that bring achievement and well-being together.

Well-being is needed to support achievement, especially when children come from backgrounds that present them with great challenges. Achievement and accomplishment are also sources of well-being. Our challenge is to find just the right ways to integrate well-being and achievement so that they are mutually reinforcing for each and every student.

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### Conclusion: Getting Better

Only when we integrate the three uplifting forces of social prosperity, ethical technology use, and restorative nature will we develop schools and societies that allow everyone

to flourish. It's not too late to follow the injunction of the 1996 European Commission report and to learn not only how to be as individuals but also how to live together. Supporting the development of the whole child means we also have to address the development and transformation of our whole world.

Universal well-being must be an ethical imperative. Academic achievement detached from well-being must become a thing of the past. The single-minded pursuit of economic growth without regard for social welfare or environmental sustainability will soon be joining it. Well-being as the solitary attainment of an individual detached from school and society cannot be our ultimate aspiration.

More than any other profession, teachers and other educators are in a prime position to influence the young. We can and must become the champions of a world and its educational systems that advance and integrate the hard work of learning and accomplishment with the deep fulfillment of well-being and social prosperity. We must educate the whole child in and for the whole world. This aspiration is the true meaning of what it must take to build back better for the well-being and success of all students everywhere, now and in the future.



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