

WELLBEING

Emotional Health

Good mental and emotional health is essential for pupils learning. We speak to the schools championing and promoting student wellbeing.

Photo from Feksted School

Student wellbeing has become a priority for schools in recent years. Growing up today seems to be harder than ever before, with children facing social pressures that we could never have even dreamt of a decade ago. Students now live in a 24-hour online world, where they are battling with constant pressures and stressors. Shockingly, it's estimated that three children in every classroom across the country suffer from a diagnosable mental health problem.

"Mental and physical wellbeing have, quite rightly, become headline news and a high priority for schools," said Sarah Gomm, Oakham's Deputy Head, Pastoral. "This is no surprise given the startling national figures – which indicate that around 10 percent of children are diagnosed with mental health issues. This social media dominated world means teenagers can find their normal adolescent behaviour and activities are both amplified and omnipresent via their digital footprint."

James Allen, Headmaster at Beech Hall School, agrees: "Young children, both boys and girls are bombarded with messages to look and act a certain way, causing them to be self-conscious. Although social media is a great tool to help children, the platform, alongside reality television, places a significant amount of pressure on them."

The increasing rise of the number of young people suffering from mental health issues and the potential long-term implications it has is now well documented, and this has been influential in the prioritisation of pupil wellbeing in the last couple of years.

"The growing recognition of the importance of student wellbeing is extremely welcome," comments Liz Laybourn, Head of Burgess Hill Girls. "In the past, it has too often been regarded as an optional add-on rather than integral to the ethos of the school. In part, the new attitude is a response to the enormous pressures that children and young people face from exposure to social media platforms and the internet in general."

Sally Sharp, Head of Wellbeing at Edge Grove School, believes that recognising and supporting pupils' emotional needs is key to supporting and sustaining their wellbeing. "Enjoying good health and levels of wellbeing is essential for children to thrive, personally and academically. The link between mindset and performance is well recognised, hence the prioritisation of the development of their

social and emotional skills along with knowledge and behaviours that will assist them to cope with challenges and to develop strong, supportive relationships.

"The learning that takes place at school may influence how pupils manage their thoughts, emotions and relationships throughout their lives and with growing evidence that dedicated programmes can lead to significant improvement in pupil's mental health, their social and emotional skills, and behaviour, the benefits of focusing on wellbeing are far reaching."

CREATING A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

To help tackle the rising mental health crisis in young people, schools have placed significant investment in creating a nurturing and supportive environment with the wellbeing of pupils being a focal point.

One example is Felsted School, who recently opened a brand new Wellbeing



Centre, the very first in-school facility of its type in the country. "Our new Wellbeing Centre puts pupil wellbeing at the heart of everything we do, and we have long had a range of strategies to help pupils negotiate the pressures of growing up and being adolescent in the changing modern world. We want to support our pupils to become well-adjusted young people who are happy," explains Headmaster Chris Townsend.

To raise awareness of the importance of wellbeing, Burgess Hill Girls has been looking at ways to find a positive approach to support girls and staff: "Despite growing openness in the media and public life about fostering good mental health and wellbeing, there was no doubt that for some parents the topic was still taboo when it came to their own child. To address this, we set up a series of parent seminars on a range of topics around mental health and wellbeing. Some were overtly mental health-focused; others were on yoga,

meditation and nutrition. This proved a really successful way of getting the parents on side and normalising mental health," explains Laybourn.

DLD College London has been focusing on the importance of emotional health over the past two years and in that time have put several measures in place to ensure not only that the students feel supported, but also that the staff who are supporting those students have the necessary training. "The creation of a head of wellbeing has been instrumental in that movement and alongside a team of counsellors we have now appointed a school coach who offers a level of mentoring and coaching to students who require that level of support," explains Tom Hadcroft, Vice Principal Pastoral. "The personal tutors receive specialised training to extend and strengthen the provision of pastoral support, alongside a commitment to ensure all members of staff have some form of mental health first aid training over the next two years."

The college has also developed its own DLD Health Charter, in conjunction with the students, to develop a proactive approach to wellbeing. Hadcroft explains: "The charter is focused on the sense of belonging, their own wellbeing performance, diet, mindfulness and biorhythms for each student. We hope to demonstrate that proactiveness will assist in emotional health."

Mindfulness and wellbeing are part of the curriculum and extracurricular activities at Edge

Grove School. The school has a wellbeing programme, Flourish, which incorporates lessons and activities that equip and encourage pupils to take interest in and responsibility for their own wellbeing. "Flourish is far reaching, ensuring that wellbeing and mindfulness practices are embedded in all areas of school life," explains Sharp. "Lessons start and finish with a mindful moment, Flourish working walls are present in every classroom, we have Flourish ambassadors who take responsibility for form-based Flourish activities led by the head of wellbeing, we have Flourish assemblies, personal development coaching and mindfulness lessons too."

Oakham has a full Body and Mind Programme, delivered through their boarding and day houses. "House staff are trained to understand, educate and support students in all aspects of physical and mental health that affect teenagers' lives," explains Gomm. The

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school also hosts specialist days led by outside experts, including mental and physical wellbeing days which feature a range of lectures, seminars and activities. "We have members of staff who are trained in mindfulness and are in the process of appointing a mental health practitioner."

A family ethos plays a big part in the promotion of student wellbeing at Beech Hall School. Allen explains: "We foster a caring community where all year groups support each other. They take breaks at the same time, encouraging inclusivity and allowing them to socially interact with children of all ages and abilities. Like in many schools children have a 'go to adult' which rather than specifically being a SENCO (special educational needs coordinator) or councillor, they are allowed to choose themselves dependent on who they feel most comfortable opening up to."

The Royal Masonic School for Girls has introduced a mindfulness programme throughout the school to help support student wellbeing. "Interest and increased scientific evidence led us to the Mindfulness in School Programme. Mindfulness has the potential to improve student behaviour, psychological health and attention. It can assist students to feel calmer and more positive, reduce their exam stress and anxiety and get on better with others. Staff members have attended a number of conferences to learn more about the programme and this led to all staff being introduced to mindfulness in January 2016," comments Rachel Bloomfield Proud, senior teacher (community).

The school are also introducing wellbeing lessons to year 9 pupils from this September and will be offering sixth form mindfulness as part of a wellbeing course in the RMS Edge programme, a programme of courses available to students in year 12 to provide breadth to their A-level studies.

Taunton School has introduced some

unusual activities to promote student happiness, last year they had a circus group visit and they are currently looking into a petting zoo. "These help build on the day to day breadth which already exists from more traditional school 'wellbeing pursuits' such as a team sports, drama, music and outdoor education through newer school ideas such as yoga, art therapy, pilates and mindfulness sessions," explains Ed Burnett, Deputy Head Pastoral.

In 2017, The Leys started The Leys Mental Health Project with the aim to support those with mental health issues. As part of the project, pupils were encouraged to 'take five' to make five small changes that would help them handle stress better. Two sixth formers compiled a wellbeing page for the school intranet which brought together information and resources on stress, anger, anxiety, body image, relationships, sexuality, bullying, sleep and depression. Matrons and school nurses received 'mental health first aid' training and a male counsellor was added to the counselling team to ensure all pupils had

someone suitable they could turn to.

"Schools with excellent pupil support should be able to easily and clearly demonstrate how wellbeing is part of the curriculum," comments Tracey Gray from Merchiston Castle School. "Pupils thrive in environments where teachers are interested in them, care for them and are trustworthy, allowing them the confidence to raise concerns about wellbeing and safety in the knowledge that they will be listened to sensitively."

IMPACT ON LEARNING

Actively supporting wellbeing and promoting a culture of positive psychology contributes to pupils feeling good about themselves and each other, enabling them to function and perform at their best.

"Healthy levels of confidence, self-esteem and resilience enable children to make the most of opportunities and deal with difficult situations; enhanced interpersonal and communication skills support them socially and academically," comments Sharp. "Mindful practice encourages recognition of the link between thoughts, feelings and actions assisting them to respond to thoughts and feelings in a measured, considered manner and thereby make good choices."

"Children need to be happy in order to learn," confirms Allen. "By creating a happy and supportive environment in which children can enjoy coming to school, we enable them to thrive academically, which in turn can boost self-confidence."

Gomm agrees: "If a child isn't in the right place both mentally and physically, they will not be in the best state to learn. Pastoral care therefore is at the very centre of students being able to achieve and thrive at school."



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